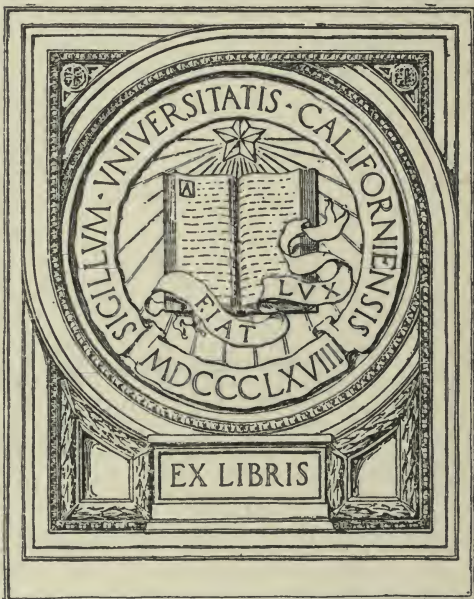


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# THREE CROSSES



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THREE CROSSES  
BY FEDERIGO TOZZI



LONDON : MARTIN SECKER

This translation has been  
made from the Italian  
by R. CAPELLERO

*Eng. Almanac*

THE VIRAL  
ASSOCIATION

LONDON: MARTIN SECKER LTD. (1921)



## *Note on Tozzi*

*Federigo Tozzi died of influenza and pneumonia in Rome on 21st March 1920, just when Three Crosses had brought him recognition and success after a life of poverty and struggle. Not till a month before his death did he begin to think of allowing himself the luxury of a shelf for his books. He was born on New Year's Day, 1883, at Siena, where the scene of all his novels is laid. His childhood was unhappy. His father, violent and overbearing in character, was a prosperous inn-keeper, proprietor of the "Pesce Azzurro," now the "Sasso Rosso." Such a man could only despise the timid, sensitive, yet passionate boy, who showed no inclination to follow in his footsteps—a worthless waster, whose one interest was in books, though he had proved a hopeless failure at school. Con Gli Ochi Chiusi is largely a record of his own childhood, containing a description of his mother's death and of an early love affair. Tozzi developed slowly. Indeed no real development was possible till after*

*his father's death in 1908, and then his financial troubles began. He had to support his stepmother, with whom he was on excellent terms, and a few months later he married. He owned some land, but as a farmer he was not a success. Il Podere, which opens with a description of his father's death, contains some of his experiences at this time. At last he was left with but one small farm, which he let. For a few months he was an "impiegato" on the railways.*

*Tozzi was fortunate in his marriage. His wife sympathised with his literary ambitions and her encouragement and sound judgment were of the greatest help to him. He would have nothing to do with the literary movements and coteries of the day, for which he had the profoundest contempt. He set himself to learn Latin and study the old Tuscan, especially the old Sienese, writers. His first book was an Antologia Di Antichi Scrittori Senesi. Herein lies the secret of his success. This powerful, heavily built, utterly unpolished Tuscan peasant with the piercing eyes, who was leading the life of a herdsman in the Roman Campagna in 1919 and who once asked in half-humorous despair whether he could ever learn to kiss a lady's hand, possessed the instinct of a true literary artist. When he began to write,*

*his work at once took its place in the great classical tradition of Italy. Three Crosses, the only one of his novels which is not autobiographical, is undoubtedly Tozzi's finest artistic achievement.*



## I

GIULIO shouted to his brother: "Wake up, Niccolo!"

The latter gave a grunt, swore, pulled down the brim of his hat and closed his eyes again. He was squatting in a chair, with his hands in his trouser-pockets and his head leaning against one of the shelves of the bookcase; near by was an antique wooden chest, covered with vases, china plates and paintings, kept there on view for strangers.

"Here! Aren't you ashamed to be asleep, and all the morning too! You irritate me!"

At this Niccolo grinned and opened his eyes to look at his brother.

"Well, and why not? Until meal-time comes, I like to sleep!"

"I wanted to tell you that I must go to the bank. There's a renewal this morning."

Niccolo snorted impatiently and replied:

"Well, go! You needn't wake me up to say that."

"And who is to take care of the shop?"

"No fool is coming in to buy books at this time of day. Go along. I'll look after it."

While Giulio searched for his top-hat, Niccolo got up and bounded hastily to the door, as if he intended to run out; then returned and resumed

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his seat. He was tall and stout, with a small grizzled beard, large lips and grey eyes.

Since Giulio would go to the bank himself, instead of sending him or their other brother, Niccolo looked at him and asked, with studied earnestness :

"Where is Enrico? Must we always do everything for him too?"

"I dare say he is out for a walk now. Where else can he be? You know that he always feels he must take a stroll at this time of day."

"And then you blame me because I stay here and sleep!"

Giulio wanted to smile; but he put on his spectacles, inspected the signature on the promissory note, and said :

"Just look! Don't you think it has turned out very well?"

Niccolo shrugged his shoulders without replying, while Giulio repeated, with a kind of admiration growing less and less involuntary :

"I think it turned out very well indeed!"

His brother bent his head and grunted again, then he began to beat a hasty tattoo with his foot, while the wooden chest, with all that stood upon it, trembled.

"Stop it! You'll break everything!"

"Perhaps it would be just as well."

Giulio, scratching his chin, looked at him almost with surprise.

"It's no use trying to get you to understand!"

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As things are now, my dear fellow, even if we wanted to stop them, it would be too late! Rather let's hope we find the money there to meet these bills."

"And suppose the bank discovers first that you—that we are forging the signatures?"

Giulio was the gloomiest of the three Gambi brothers, but he was also the strongest, and he hoped to earn enough from the bookshop to do away finally with all dangerous expedients. He had been the one to propose the way out, and he it was who had studied the forging of signatures. But when his brother spoke to him like that even he would lose heart, and he would go to the bank solely because it was imperative to gain time. It was also true, though, that it had become a habit, which rather worried him because of the punctuality that it required. It flattered him, however, to feel that for three years now the whole scheme had been going so well; they had taken over 50,000 lire without arousing the slightest suspicion, and even the Cavaliere Orazio Nicchioli, who had, in fact, been good enough to accept some promissory notes in the first instance, guessed absolutely nothing as yet. He continued to be their friend, and to call at the bookshop every evening for the usual exchange of gossip.

Giulio was even taller than Niccolo, but clean-shaven and younger, although his hair was quite white. His little moustache was



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still fair, his cheeks rosy, and his blue eyes were like some stone of that colour. The most intelligent and the only one of the three who ever felt like work, he was in the bookshop from morning till night. <sup>★</sup>Niccolo, on the other hand, was also a collector of antiques; he was nearly always away from Siena, searching the old farm-houses or the surrounding villages for something worth picking up.

Enrico was a bookbinder, and worked in a small shop close to the bookshop. He was short, with a darker moustache, and his manners were rude and insolent.

Niccolo alone was married; but they all lived together, with two young orphan girls, their nieces. Their father had been successful, and they also had been well-off at first; then, by degrees, the bookshop had begun to yield less and less.

Giulio put on his top-hat, after having dusted it with his sleeve, and stood for a while in hesitation, examining the note lying open on his writing-desk; then he scratched his chin again, took up the note and put it in his pocket. Niccolo was watching him, muttering to himself.

“It’s no good swearing!” <sup>G.</sup>

“Then what am I to do?” <sup>N</sup>

“Nothing! Put up with it!” <sup>G</sup>

★ “Yes; but the last thing I want to do is to go to prison!” <sup>N</sup>

★ [He had a loud, robust voice, and when he



shouted like that you couldn't tell whether he was speaking seriously or in fun. And then not even Giulio could find it possible to feel depressed or cast down. He only replied, with the calmness of an educated man :

"They will put *me* in gaol! Does that satisfy you?"

But Niccolo cried: "Come back soon; I don't want anything to happen to me in this old hole!"

Giulio, fearing to lose the note and keeping his hand in the same pocket, proceeded to the bank, trying to walk with his head held well up and to appear quite at ease, certain of himself and of his actions.

Niccolo remained in his chair and started chewing a cigar, spitting the morsels under the desk, and stretching out his legs into the middle of the shop. When a gentleman entered whom he knew personally, for they had once gone out shooting together, he did not even move.

"How are you?" the new-comer asked.

"I am quite well. And you?"

"Oh, a slight cold."

Niccolo smiled and remarked with a feigned seriousness which always deceived people at first: "Take care of yourself!"

Signor Riccardo Valentini looked at a few books while Niccolo closed his eyes once more, completely ignoring any presence besides his own in the bookshop. Everyone knew how

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useless it was to try to buy books from him, and would always turn to Giulio, or wait for his return when he was out.

Valentini said to him :

"Yours is a nice life. Always sitting down."

"I know it is ! Do you envy me too ?"

"Oh no, indeed. On the contrary, I am only pleased on your account."

"I am leading the life of a gentleman just to spite those who would like to see me begging. Am I not right ? They will all eat their hearts out with rage."

Signor Valentini laughed.

"Thrushes and quails for dinner to-day," Niccolo went on. "And I've sent for some wine—from one of the best-known Chianti estates—which would astonish you if you only tasted it. *Dio mio*, how I shall enjoy it ! For me, I find nothing better in life. I am born a gentleman, I am ; more so than you."

"More than me ? Oh ! I believe you. You have not all the worries that I have, and that I don't seem to be able to get on without. Only this morning I was compelled to come to Siena because my bailiff has suddenly fallen ill. How can I put things off till to-morrow with an estate of thirty farms like mine ? All on my own shoulders. Without mentioning, too, the trade side of it."

These outbursts always amused Niccolo ; he rubbed his hands, remarking :

"Wine and punch. But I'll make my own punch. Half-a-litre of rum each time. Oh, I treat myself well! I know how to live."



His voice was joyful, though it was a furious and violent joy. And when he laughed in that peculiar way of his, everyone liked him.

"Now as soon as Giulio, who has gone to keep an appointment with a pretty lady, comes back, we will close this old hole, and we'll go and dine. And what a feed! I'd like to have two bellies. One isn't enough for me. I got our servant to buy a kilo of Parmesan cheese and some pears that weigh over a pound each. I'll wager that you begin to feel like dining with me."

Valentini laughed and clapped a hand on his shoulder. Then he asked:

"What Madonna is that? There, in the centre of the wooden chest. The standing one."

Niccolo became serious.

"Don't you want to tell me?"

"On the contrary. I'll tell you the truth: it is a Madonna that I found in a peasant's cottage. At first they wouldn't sell it to me on any account. And then I only gave one hundred lire for it."

He stood up, and, his voice becoming high, he repeated exultingly:

"One hundred lire! One hundred lire! It was given to me. He must have been a fool, that man."

"And how much would you ask for it?"

Niccolo's voice thundered: "Me?" Then, with contempt: "Yesterday an Englishman would have given me four thousand lire! Four thousand lire!"

"And you didn't sell it?"

His voice seemed to calm itself to become exact: "I will take six thousand for it."

He had sat down again, but suddenly he sprang up noisily and shouted again:

"One hundred lire, the idiot. It needed an idiot like him to give it to me." And he pretended to laugh loudly—as if he were on the point of choking over it all.

Giulio entered, stern and serious, with his hat over his eyes, where it usually slipped without his being aware of the fact, whenever he returned from the bank.

"What are you so excited about?"

Niccolo ceased instantly and flung himself towards the door as if he preferred to escape rather than waste time in answering.

## II

OUTSIDE he walked with his head up, in the centre of the road, like an important person ; he barely answered if anyone greeted him, but walked on, as if he disdained everybody ; swiftly too, as if he had no time to lose. By the Via Cavour he came to a greengrocer's, and looked at the baskets of fruit displayed without stopping, only just turning his neck a little, as though he had to readjust his collar.✕ The smell of the fruit reached his nostrils and set them quivering ; his knees bent under him ; but he continued his walk, without quite knowing where he went and at every step colliding with somebody ; finally he turned back, thinking of the fruit he had seen, which he imagined to be better and more delicious than any he had tasted in his whole life. The tears almost came to his eyes because he had no money in his pocket, but he decided to beg his brother to buy some fruit for him.

In the shop, he found that Valentini had gone, and he said to Giulio :

"What did that rascal want? The next time he comes into the shop I'll kick him!"

"What harm has he done to you?" asked Giulio, laughing.

"Oh! Must he have done me some harm?"

Is it necessary? I can't stand the sight of him, I can't bear him: that's the harm he's done me!"

"You never can stand anybody! You're half crazy. Really, you don't belong to our kind."

But Niccolo took Giulio's arm and squeezed it, saying to him—after grinding his teeth like a schoolboy who can contain himself no longer:

✕ "Giulio, Giulio dear! I've seen such apples and such pears that . . . I'd give ten years to taste them! I've fallen in love with them!"

Giulio, amusing himself at his brother's greediness, queried:

"Were they really so beautiful?"

"Marvellous! They must be like butter, the peel's so soft. I won't eat at all to-day—if I can't have some of that fruit too!"

"We'll send along Enrico when he comes back!"

"Yes, yes! take all there is in the till this morning, and send him. Make his mouth water too!" ✕

"That won't need much effort."

✕ Enrico entered, banging the door to. Once, when they could afford an assistant in the shop, he had always had it opened for him and closed after him. He looked all round the shop, to see if anyone was there; suspiciously, and ready for any ungraciousness.

"Where have you been?" asked Giulio.



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"Are you my father that I should tell you everything? Do I ever ask you where you've been to?"

"You're quite right," Niccolo agreed.

"You be quiet!" answered Enrico in his drawling, nasal voice; "you are always ready to squabble. I've just seen Valentini coming out of here: what on earth does he ever come in for if he never buys a book? Besides, he hardly knows how to read. Why doesn't he stay at home? When our floor is worn out, we'll have to have it repaired—with our money, not with his. If he stayed more at home his steward wouldn't keep his wife company so much."

"Is that so? Who told you? This makes me feel quite happy."

"I know. Whenever I tell you something you always ask me where I learnt it. Still, if you don't believe it, it's all the same to me."

Giulio opened one of the drawers in the desk, and taking out a ten-lire note handed it to him.

"Go to Ciccia, and buy two kilos of apples and pears."

"Have I got to go? Can't one of you two go?"

Niccolo wouldn't speak to him, and wouldn't even look at him, as though he had been irritated by him. Giulio said to Enrico:

"It is Niccolo who wants you to go."

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"Well, if I go, I must also buy a piece of gorgonzola at the grocer's."

"Do what you like."

Enrico went towards the door ; then Niccolo burst out :

"Can't you hurry up, instead of standing here in our way!" And when Enrico had gone out, he continued : "He never feels like doing anything at all."

Both the brothers became silent. Only after what seemed like half-an-hour, Giulio, who had sat down at his desk and had been tapping his spectacles on the blotting-paper with little regular knocks, said :

"With to-day's bill, it means another five thousand lire."

"And you tell *me* this?"

"Well, who should I tell if not you?"

"I don't care. I don't want to hear anything about it."

"Are you afraid of soiling your hands?"

"Giulio, stop it! You know what I have in my heart. There's a thorn as large as my thumb."

"I know : it may be equal to mine."

Then Niccolo became affectionate, his voice almost pleading and soft, and he said coaxingly :

"If it were not that we are so fond of one another, I would like to turn into a beast—a toad."



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Giulio turned to him with tenderness; but his brother only said:

"Don't look at me."

"Those little girls need some winter clothes."

"You'll get them some. At once! For them, I'd even go without boots. Anything! I'd die of hunger."

Whenever Niccolo had these intentions, always of very short duration, he would stand up to his full height, swelling his chest and walking up and down the shop, which to him, in these circumstances, seemed too small, much too small. He was satisfied with himself, pleased, and would look round with affectionate pride; panting, as if he had been called upon suddenly to defend his two nieces from danger. He seemed unlikely ever to stand still again.

"Those two girls must be sacred to us. Mustn't they?"

"I've always said so too!"

"Only Enrico . . . do you think Enrico thinks so as well?"

Niccolo hastily changed the subject.

"When on earth will he come back with the fruit?"

Giulio glanced at his watch.

"It's only ten minutes since he left."

"I'll go home, and wait for you both there. Don't be long." And Niccolo departed.

Giulio, left alone, began preparing some

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invoices that had to be paid. While he was writing a young Frenchman entered, an art critic, who called every morning on his way back from the Archivio di Stato; he had established himself in Siena in order to study certain painters of the Quattrocento. He was invariably well dressed, had a very fair moustache and always carried an ivory-tipped, gold-mounted stick. His eyes were blue, and his moustache seemed to weigh down his smile.

"Good-day, Signor Nisard."

"Good-day."

"What news have you for me?"

"I have found out a very important thing about Matteo di Giovanni. An extraordinary thing. A discovery that will cause much comment. I'm very pleased."

"May one inquire what it is?" asked Giulio.

"It will help me with the book I am preparing."

"Then I don't wish to be indiscreet: I don't wish you to tell me."

The bookseller had a kind of admiration for anything done by other people; and he was happy if he could be told what was being done.

He was a good friend, therefore, and one in whom it was a pleasure to confide. It seemed to him that others, who were not compromised as he and his brothers were, belonged to a

world which for him had existed only before the forging of signatures. He was feeling now—more than ever—forced to endure the moral consequences of his offence. He would not even have dared to ask anyone to respect him. He did not wish it, in fact. He never allowed others to show him any sentiment whatever; he shunned it, and became timid; he did not wish to deceive anyone who might become fond of him.

Having passed judgment on himself, he shared his intimate thoughts with his own brothers only. Therefore his smile was always embarrassed and reserved; and his smile meant sadness to him. Niccolo, on the other hand, did not want friendships and would reproach Giulio whenever he was affable to anyone. He would say to him:

“You know that between us and other people there is something that they would consider absolutely unpardonable. Similarly neither must we feel any tenderness towards others.”

Giulio was listening to Nisard, with his hands in his pockets and without lifting his eyes, as a poor man would who feels happier because he is allowed to spend half-an-hour with a man richer than himself. He would even have preferred Nisard not to shake hands with him.

That morning Nisard was thinking how little the people of Siena spent on books, and, feeling conversational, he asked Giulio:

"How is the shop getting on?"

Giulio shook his head in answer.

"I really don't know how we manage to keep open," he replied.

The pleasure that he had felt in listening to the talk of Nisard had now become pain. It seemed so very unjust to him, and such an acute privation that he also could not devote his life to some object, some work, without difficulties and worries. Often he would think of different projects and make plans. But always he would renounce them again directly; though sometimes his self-esteem would retain the memory of them gratefully. Nisard said to him:

"You were lucky to have earned your money in the past; now you have enough to live on."

Giulio was perplexed for a moment, and then answered:

"Oh yes! it isn't a fortune, though, by any means! But I don't want to think of it. It will be as God wishes."

Nisard laughed, thinking that he was exaggerating through parsimony and meanness. But Giulio half closed his eyes and continued:

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"But, Signor Giulio, do you wish me to understand——"

"I never tell lies; that is to say, I never want to tell lies!"

And he became thoughtfully silent. Nisard

looked at him as if he understood the joke, and asked :

"Are you afraid I shall go and tell tales to the tax-collector so that he'll raise your rates?"

At that moment Enrico opened the door and entered, leaving it wide open behind him. He was carrying in both arms the fruit he had just bought, and he remarked happily :

"Now I'm still without the gorgonzola! ← BFD  
Don't invent tales about my always thinking of myself before others. You always say I am an egoist."

Nisard enjoyed watching the embarrassed and awkward look on Giulio's face.

Nevertheless, the latter exclaimed : "Those pears are really beautiful!"

Enrico asked : "Can I go home now? There's nothing else to buy?" *sarcasm?*

His brother signified that he could—and he went without a word. Enrico was like that; when he had bought anything, satisfied any little whim, he would become ruder than usual, and if he spoke, it would be in anything but a polite voice or manner. ?

Giulio found it necessary to explain : "A generous table has always been one of our weaknesses. We are all the same; even my sister-in-law, Modesta. We have spoilt her also."

He was impatient now to be home, because he knew that they would not wait for him, and he knew, too, that the first-comers would have

the first choice, and, naturally, the best. If it had not been for the presence of Nisard he would have closed the shop at once, even though another customer had told him that he would be calling presently to buy some books. He was sorry now that he had promised to wait for him, and so he complained :

"I can't understand how people can throw away money on printed paper ! I am in here all day, I never see the sun, and never know the colour of the sky ; I am sick of seeing books, I even hate to touch them. The best thing would be to pitch them all out into the rubbish heap."

"You are an intelligent man, and yet you speak seriously of books in this way."

"I may have been intelligent. I was intelligent once. It's all over now, though. I am forty years old, and I feel as if I were eighty or a hundred ! And you don't believe me now, either, do you ?"

Nisard, smilingly, and with a deprecating gesture, declared himself resigned and ready to believe him. But Giulio was trying to remember whether they had bought the Parmesan cheese for the macaroni, and, inwardly, he was wondering : "How vexed Niccolo will be when he knows that it isn't as good as usual, and not the kind that we usually have." And in his mind's eye he pictured his brother being particularly irritable to his wife for the rest



of the meal. He was quite capable of rising from the dinner-table—directly after the meal—and of going out without a word even to Modesta until the next day, while his two nieces—Chiarina and Lola—laughed over it all; and Enrico would declare that it was unbecomingly crazy to behave like this. These visions delighted Giulio, who was standing stock-still in the centre of the shop, his whole expression betraying the pleasure caused by his thoughts.

Suddenly several church bells pealed out unanimously. It was midday. Giulio, to assure himself of the fact, went out into the road and listened to them. The town-hall clock was striking the hour placidly and calmly; and the church of San Cristoforo, the one nearest to the bookshop, joined in with its chime. The pavements were emptier than before, and a few of the workers had begun to emerge from their offices and workshops, homeward bound. Then Giulio said softly, as if to himself:

“I can close down now.”


Nisard, who had to return all the way to the villa which he had rented for his stay in Siena, and which was right away by the Porta Camollia, hurriedly bowed to him and went his way. After five minutes the town-hall clock repeated the hour; and to Giulio it sounded as if it were doing so in reiteration of his last remark, and it seemed good to him; almost as good and appetising as a table dainty.

### III

✓ AFTER a meal Niccolo was always disposed to be jovial, but so voluble that he would abuse anyone who said a word more to him than he wished to listen to.

Giulio, in the same interval after the midday meal, would coach his two nieces in different subjects; and Enrico would retire to rest for a couple of hours.

On this particular afternoon Niccolo had reached the limit of his patience and suddenly burst out:



“Oh, don’t speak to me! you’ll only make me wild! I was feeling so jolly, too! Leave me; I feel much better alone, and talking to myself. Nobody understands me as well as I do myself!” And he went out, walking very slowly, and panting as he walked; he was almost perspiring, although it was already the month of October. He had lately suffered from gout, as had both his brothers; and after his recent heavy meal he could hardly move at all.

In the road he tried to look smiling and happy; but if some acquaintance approached him amiably he would hurriedly avoid him, or would become suddenly forbidding, almost offended.



After his walk to the Lizza, which sufficed him for smoking a whole cigar, he returned to the shop, and found there his friend, Vittorio Corsali, an Insurance Company agent.

"Oh, I can't talk to-day! I don't feel like it. It bothers me too much."

"I can't see how I can be bothering you if I haven't yet uttered a word since you came in."

"Never mind! A person can worry me even if he keeps his mouth shut."

"But, as I was just explaining to your brother Giulio, I've come to tell you of a good little piece of business for you."

"I don't want to talk of business. Speak to Giulio about it. Not when I'm here, though; and especially to-day, when I can't even stand the buzzing of a fly."

And he burst into a loud, blustering laugh. It was one of his violent, sensual, grating laughs, and, knowing him, Corsali turned to Giulio and remarked:

"I'll wait until he gets over it."

At this Niccolo was seized with sudden fury.

"And I tell you again that you won't speak of it to me! D'you understand? I'll take you by the neck and pitch you out of the shop!"

He was breathing hard, and biting his fingers. Corsali, with an offended look, despite Giulio's signals not to take any notice of Niccolo's eccentricities, took a step towards the door, intending to go.

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He had scarcely turned, however, when Niccolo again burst into laughter, this time so spontaneous and merry that Corsali stopped in astonishment.

"Didn't you notice I was only joking?"

"That's not the way to treat a friend!"

But Niccolo wouldn't hear of it, and threatened to become abusive once more.

Vittorio Corsali was thin, bald and had a white moustache. When he spoke he showed all his teeth, and the whole shape of his head reminded one of a fox's cranium.

Giulio asked his brother: "When do you think you will feel disposed to listen to him? You will oblige us by letting us know."

"Any time you like—except to-day."

"But, you see, to-morrow I shall be going with the carriage to Radicondoli on Insurance business, and it was there, in the parson's house, that I saw a silver crucifix——"

Niccolo, whose curiosity was getting the upper hand, turned and interrupted vehemently:

"Will he sell it?"

"That's just what I wanted to talk to you about!"

Niccolo seemed angry, and as if he must and would squabble.

"Are you sure that I shall like it?"

"I think so."

"You don't understand anything much, though; I don't trust your judgment."

"I know that you think me a fool."

"How much does he want for it?" Giulio intervened. "Is he stingy?"

"I think, if I understood rightly, it means two hundred franc notes."

Niccolo raged.

"Tell the priest to put it down his throat! It won't do for me! I only buy from those who don't know how to sell. If he should ever call at this bookshop, I'll kick him out! Tell him so, from me! God save him, if he comes to look for me here!" And he opened his mouth wide, as if he would have bitten the offender there and then, after which he smiled and calmed himself. He sprawled on his chair and looked alternately at his brother and at his friend, his eyes sparkling with enjoyment, mutely asking them to join in his mirth. His whole face was so expressive of agreeable hilarity that the other two immediately felt its influence and smiled, with the result that Niccolo, on seeing their change of mood, snapped, with brusque regret:

"Don't speak to me."

Then, as if Corsali were not there at all, he began to talk to his brother.

"Have you sent those invoices?"

"I have only to put them in the envelopes."

"What are you waiting for, then?"

"I'll do it before this evening."

"Have you got them quite right?"

"I copied them exactly from the book."

"With the dates?"

"With the dates."

"I'd like to know why they haven't been paid."

"Rich people always like to do things calmly."

Niccolo tapped the wooden chest with the ring on his little finger; then he remarked, with a yawn: "My head aches; that stew was too spicy, and it hasn't agreed with me."

"It's you who always want it like that."

"Will there be chicken this evening?"

"I think so."

"Because, if not, I shall go and dine in some restaurant."

"You can go; nobody forbids you to. It wouldn't be the first time either."

"And you, Vittorio, what are you having for dinner?"

"Me? I shall eat whatever is put before me; probably soup, for all the world like dish-water, a little bit of boiled meat, and then, if there happens to be any, a tiny morsel of cheese—enough to set a mouse-trap with."

Niccolo laughed and said: "I'd like to find a nice turkey for to-morrow. Do you know, I wouldn't taste a piece of boiled meat for anything; I couldn't put it into my mouth, not even to chew it."

He was gay and lively, and he began telling one of his stories. He was always hearing new ones; and on telling them he would

laugh with his whole body, shaking all over with the enjoyment of it.

"This really is a good one. Try and find another person who will always manage to get the best as I do."

Giulio was laughing too, but not happily, and with a queer, choky laugh. Niccolo continued :

"*Dio!* how I laugh! My eyes are brimming with tears. It even hurts me to laugh so much. Last night my wife woke up and said to me : 'Whatever are you laughing at?' That was because I remembered the little tale I was telling the other day. Tell it to Vittorio, Giulio. My little jokes ought really to be printed."

But suddenly he became very serious, because Enrico was entering the shop. The latter was still sleepy and stupefied ; he was walking in a loose, disjointed manner, and knocked against the book-shelf.

"Oh dear, I can't see. I *have* slept badly. There was that marble-worker under my windows hammering away and making such a terrific noise. Oh! such blows. When they know that there's someone trying to sleep they really should be more careful. It seemed as if he were doing it purposely. I'd just like to know why he had to make such a noise."

"Perhaps he's just had some marble delivered to him."

"Eh? But it's a question of good breeding. He's not the only one that lives in that house."

What do I care for his slabs of marble? Might as well say that I am concerned because his wife carries on with other men. She does so every day. Everybody says so."

"And what does he care if you wished to sleep?"

"Oh, how you do talk! Of the two—and you can ask anyone you like whether it isn't so—of course, I am right. I'll wager whatever you like on it. Any gentleman would agree with me. Because, if I sleep, he can go on working just the same, whereas I had to get up because he was working. When I came down I was going to speak to him about it, and then I didn't. But another time I won't be quiet. I'm too good, and that's the truth. And why ever did you drink all the rum from that bottle?"

Niccolo answered: "Buy one for yourself."

"Certainly; from now onwards I will do so. Fancy having to do that among brothers. I did think I'd find at least a small glassful."

"And did you drink water instead?"

"Water? May my eyes fail me if I ever even so much as put a drop of it in my mouth! Water, indeed!"

When he was cross his voice sounded malicious; and he continued:

"You say it to hurt me, I know; but, thank heaven, I can hold my own. Why d'you ask me if I drink water? Mustn't we have any



respect for each other's feelings just because we happen to be brothers? Don't you agree, Vittorio? If they'll repeat it, I'll want to know the reason why, and seriously too. I'm very touchy, mind, especially when I know I'm in the right."

"Why don't you go back to your book-binding?" Niccolo asked him.

"I'll do what I please. I have as much right to do so as you have. My books are not going to be bound with my own skin. If you feel like arguing and quarrelling, I am always ready, even if there are two of you against me."

Giulio looked at him in astonishment, and replied:

"It seems to me that we let you say anything you like."

"Of course; you can't do otherwise. I'm right."

"I don't say no."

"Well, then, why will you insist?"

"I tell you that I have no intention of raising my voice or of squabbling."

"Not you, perhaps, but Niccolo."

Then Niccolo said to Giulio: "Advise him to go." And he picked up an antique vase.

"You'd like to smash that vase by breaking my head? I'd use my hands instead. Make him put it down. Not because I'm afraid, heavens! no, but because he must be careful of the shop goods. It's of that kind of terra-

cotta that will splinter if you only look at it. Besides, see how he has knocked and spoiled that wooden chest. You are a slovenly waster."

Vittorio, who felt very much like laughing, said: "Please stop it, both of you. You ought to be ashamed; and brothers, too. Aren't you fond of one another?"

Enrico answered:

"He isn't! He'd tear me to little bits if he could!"

Giulio said: "That's not true!"

"You're always excusing him, but it is so. Make him put back that vase. He won't listen to me. Won't you put it down? Then I'll go. Curse the moment I came in!"

He gave an irritated look at the book-shelf, and departed.

Niccolo could contain himself no longer.

"We must find a remedy. He must be made to behave. This can't go on."

"It's partly your fault; you don't know how to handle him."

"I only wish he'd die!"

Corsali asked: "Why?"

"I know why! Don't ask me to speak of it! If Giulio and I were alone things would go better with us than they are going. I've been wishing we were alone for a long time."

"Anyhow, he's with us now, and it's as well that he remains with us until——"

Corsali, of course, failed to see Giulio's



allusion ; but Niccolo none the less tremblingly cut him short : " Be quiet ! "

Giulio understood that he might be tempted to talk imprudently, and Corsali, observing them, said, with a view to calming them both :

" I don't wish to know your private affairs at all. I come here as a friend ; and you may depend on it that I am neither a gossip nor a cad."

Giulio regained his serenity.

" It's Niccolo's fault. With his absurd ways, he makes one imagine goodness knows what."

Niccolo, knocking his knees together, again interrupted :

" Be quiet, I tell you ! "

" What have I said ? "

" Be quiet, be quiet ! "

And he closed his own mouth with his hand.

Corsali became really curious, but he guessed that they would not disclose more of their secret, and therefore he felt hurt.

" If you are afraid of me I will leave you."

Niccolo immediately cried to him :

" Oh no ! I want you to stay ! "

Giulio was blushing like a shy, embarrassed young girl. Corsali looked at them and wondered.

" You were both so merry a few moments ago."

" Merry ? Me ? " Niccolo shouted. " This is the greatest calumny that could possibly be

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invented. I never laugh, never! Do you hear?"

"That's because you don't remember."

"Enough! Enough! I say that I never laugh, never!"

Giulio signed to Corsali to go. And when he was gone Niccolo burst into sobs.

"What are you crying for now?"

"I can't stand it any longer."

Giulio, too, as he stood and looked at him from behind his desk, felt his eyes fill suddenly with burning tears, blinding him.

And they lacked the courage to look at each other again.

## IV

THE Cavaliere Orazio Nicchioli, an alderman of the borough, and the head of several charity committees, was always certain of finding an invariably deferential welcome. He would assume an air of affectionate benevolence when he entered, trying not to let the others see that he considered himself the owner of the bookshop. In reality he was sincerely fond of all the three brothers. He had a babyish mouth, which he was continually pursing up; and he would look at people, with lowered head, from above his spectacles. ★ 102  
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The day following that on which the two brothers were so overcome, he asked Giulio in an undertone, so that Niccolo should not hear :

“How are things going?”

Giulio flushed, and replied :

“They don’t change.”

“But . . . er . . . nothing worse?”

“No, no!”

Niccolo, who was always very subdued and humbled with Nicchioli, and who had been waiting for the other to notice him and address him first, said at last :

“Won’t you speak to me?”

“Why should I make any difference between you and Giulio? But you are always tucked

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away there on your chair. Poor Signor Niccolo."

"I am better here than anywhere else."

Quite involuntarily, he almost felt like joking even with Nicchioli, but he restrained himself, smiled and felt quite happy. Giulio, on the other hand, was perturbed, and felt the necessity of keeping himself strongly under control in order not to lose his head. He would have willingly gone away, disappeared anywhere, rather than go on talking to Nicchioli. At other times and in similar circumstances he had felt compelled to make some excuse, perhaps the need for a postage stamp—had gone out apparently to buy it, and had remained away as long as was decently possible. Or he wished he could have acted with Enrico's rudeness; he would have declared a veritable pile of work needed his immediate attention, and would calmly have walked out. This behaviour, however, Niccolo could never forgive Enrico, and would certainly not have tolerated it in Giulio.

Nicchioli had a way of being so exceedingly affectionate sometimes that the brothers were at a loss as to what attitude to adopt. Niccolo ventured:

"Giulio, bring up a chair."

"I'll get one myself, many thanks."

"That would indeed be too much. You must take mine."

All the same, he did not move; and he continued: "As you are always giving us the pleasure of calling on us, you must remain as long as you please."

The Cavaliere was moved by their manner; and they, observing this, tried to think of things to say to please him still further.

"How is your wife?"

"She is very well, thank you."

"And the little boy?"

"He is growing every day."

"Such a beautiful child!"

The Cavaliere was so proud of his little boy that he could hardly find suitable words in which to praise him enough.

"He is indeed a marvel. So beautiful and strong . . . so healthy and well-made, such little feet . . . such small hands. Intelligent! Why, he understands more than we do! One has only to say—'pss, pss,'—and he turns round immediately. And he's exactly fourteen months old. He was fourteen months old three days ago. He's my greatest comfort."

Niccolo felt a growing inclination to laugh, but he sneezed instead. The Cavaliere turned to Giulio:

"Come with me. We'll take a walk together, so that we can talk about him."

Giulio, finding it impossible to refuse, put on his hat and replied: "Certainly."

"He is the only subject that I love to talk

about. There's nothing else in the world so interesting to me."

Niccolo, with a sign of the head, mutely acquiesced. They went out, and walked to the Porta Camollia, and then in Pescaia, to re-enter the city by way of Fontebranda. The Pescaia road winds round the foot of an eminence of steep and bushy ground of increasing height, behind which Siena gradually retires from view and finally is lost completely. The country on the right descends into a long slope of vineyards. At the Madonnina Scapatà, one could only see San Domenico, massive and red, on an outstanding height. The sky was tinged with a faint rosy haze; and the monastery, on another higher and steeper hill in the distance, seemed of the same red colour, with the cypresses beside it, dim, dark and tapering. A deep entrenched torrent, dashing down in hurried frenzy from its own hill, reached the level of the road through a trembling confusion of tattered and crooked poplar-trees. Near these old stunted poplars the grass was very green, so strong and freshly coloured that Nicchioli ceased talking about his son and remarked to Giulio:

"I'd exchange these fields very willingly with my own at Monteriggioni."

But he resumed his interrupted conversation immediately, not giving the bookseller time to reply. He had been telling, and not for the



first time by any means, of how many doctors had assisted his wife in her confinement; of all that had happened at that never-to-be-forgotten time, with all its dangers and relative remedies. Then, how many nurses they had had to change before finding one who apparently had the requisite quantity and quality of milk. At the present moment his son had reached the critical stage of an inflammation of the gums, due to the efforts of the teeth now beginning to come through. He took out of his pocket a small notebook, bound in white cardboard and gilt-edged, and said: "You see, so as not to forget anything, I jot it all down here. The child never cries, not even at night; but when we heard it crying lately, my wife—so sensitive and such a bundle of nerves—was alarmed at once. You see, neither of us imagined that it was anything to do with the teeth. We sent immediately—oh, immediately—for the doctor, our doctor, who, to give him his due, came at once . . . in a carriage. He really is one of the very few conscientious and scrupulous doctors whom one can absolutely trust. . . . I would never call any other doctor . . . not on any account . . . and, mind, I had forgotten to mention . . . the child was feverish! We had all lost our heads at home . . . some running this way, some running that. My mother-in-law, too, had arrived, and she wanted to apply some leeches . . . but I wouldn't let



her. Although it's not a bad remedy . . . I don't dislike it. . . . My wife was in tears. . . . I leave you to imagine the rest!"

And since he feared that Giulio's thoughts might wander, he would always make him look him in the eye as he spoke, thus keeping a firm hold on his attention.

When they returned to the bookshop, Giulio was exhausted. The Cavaliere said to Niccolo: "We've had a beautiful walk. Ask your brother."

"I believe it, when you say so."

"We'll have another one soon, shall we? And then you'll come with me, won't you, Niccolo?"

"I can't walk much, I'm afraid."

"Why not? Look at all the walking I do."

Giulio replied:

"We all three suffer from gout, as you know."

"It's a shame. Honestly. Let me be quite frank with you . . . it is a shame! Oh, if I suffered from it——"

"What would you do?"

But the Cavaliere didn't quite know what he would do, and remained pensive for a few minutes, thinking it over, feeling rather foolish. After a while he resumed:

"If I suffered from it . . . if I had it . . . I would want to get better . . . to get rid of it. Oh, I couldn't stand it!"

And he stared at the two brothers in turn,

they for their part hastily assuming expressions of great concern and firmly agreeing with him.

But Giulio had a lurking fear that Nicchioli was trying to get them to talk about themselves, so that he might understand their thoughts, their feelings, and how things stood with them. And since he considered himself the guiltiest of the three, it seemed to him that Nicchioli was suspicious, and knew or guessed the facts. Every time Nicchioli came into the shop, he would feel lost and close his eyes. Niccolo, too, was afraid, but he tried to think of other matters; otherwise he too would have become the victim of a kind of paralysis, both of mind and body, when even his replies to the most commonplace questions would be wrong, as though he were deaf, and misunderstood everything that was said to him. His blood would rush to his head, and, if the Cavaliere prolonged his visit, he would feel upset for the rest of the day.

Giulio at last had lost his health through it all, and was losing weight, though his character did not change. He had once possessed distinctive manners and almost lordly habits, so now it cost him some effort to resign himself to wearing always the same old navy blue suit, all shiny and shabby.

Nicchioli admonished them :

"I think it's useless for me to repeat it to you: if your takings are too small, you must

let me know. You know that in return for the favour I did you I only demand that you should be quite sincere and frank with me. . . . You must understand that . . . even though I may be . . . up to a certain point . . . a wealthy man . . . I must know how . . . and where to find my money, and what . . . becomes of it."

Niccolo went over to the book-shelf and altered the position of a row of books, dusting each one with his elbow as he moved it. And Giulio, too, was silent. The Cavaliere was rather surprised, and, fearing that he might have hurt their feelings, he continued :

"Mind, I speak to you like this because I am a friend of yours . . . and I can prove it to you. . . . Don't think me unkind . . . or sorry for having given my signatures. . . . I have told you that . . . I am in no hurry . . . to have back what belongs to me. . . . I know that you are as good and loyal . . . as I am. . . . I would be ashamed of suspecting anything. . . . It never even crosses my mind for an instant."

Giulio wanted to beg him to stop; and Niccolo was putting the books back upside down in a shelf that was much too small to hold them all.

Outside a regiment of soldiers was passing, and all that was heard was their regular, measured tread. Involuntarily all three turned to the shop window to look through, and gazed

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mechanically at the passing men, their state of mind intensifying a hundredfold in the silence that fell on them. Suddenly the band, with its different instruments, burst into a military march. The windows trembled, and the three men started. They listened, and their thoughts seemed to deepen in contrast to the bold, lively music outside; they were astonished. *at what?*

As the sound of the band died away in the distance they felt themselves coming together again, all three of them, to the same point as before, with their very souls in suspense. Nicchioli waited a little, collected his thoughts, and resumed:

"You see how it is with you. I am different, quite different . . . not that I wish to praise myself . . . to boast about it——"

Niccolo interrupted with his loud voice which carried conviction by its mere strength:

"If you like, we will give you back your money within two months."

This displeased Nicchioli; he thought he might have wounded their pride.

"You always take things from their worst point of view."

Giulio, with a gentleness that was repugnant *why?* even to himself, said:

"The Cavaliere did not mean anything like that. One can never talk to you at all. Please excuse him, Cavaliere, because he hardly knows

what he says. He becomes quite irresponsible at times."

Nicchioli was appeased, and once more continued :

"No one knows your honesty . . . better than I do myself . . . no one esteems you more than I do. And yet you are not satisfied ! . . . Why . . . we have known each other since boyhood . . . and I would be willing to share my last crust with you . . . if I hadn't any family. I only ask you that you should treat me as a friend . . . for really I don't see how you can complain of me."

Niccolo managed to laugh and blurt out :

"You know how crazy I am."

But the Cavaliere had not yet given full vent to his feelings, and Giulio was obliged to listen to him for nearly another half-hour. When finally he went, Giulio gasped :

"Oh ! at last we can breathe again."

"Supposing we told him of the forged bill ?" said Niccolo. "I'll wager that he'd pay it. He is so benevolent. Didn't you hear how he talks ?"

"What does it matter if he talks like that ? Either one mustn't take advantage of it, or one mustn't believe him."

"You never like to take a risk, do you ?"

"Because I know what the result would be."

"Giulio, listen to me. I tell you he'd pay that bill. Take my advice for this once."

"Will you assume the responsibility of telling him?"

"Me? As long as he doesn't notice anything and has no suspicions, I'll take good care not to say a word."

Enrico, limping with his gout, opened the door.

"I've come to take twenty lire for the fish. They tell me that in the market-place they're selling fish as white as snow, and a basket of eels, still alive."

"You did right, then, to come back. But, another time, if you're going to leave us alone again when the Cavaliere turns up, I'll have nothing more to do with you."

However, as Giulio was laughing Enrico saw that it was not a quarrelling matter, so he asked:

"What did he say to you? I can't understand why that man tumbles in here every day as if our bookshop were his confessional. It's positively indecent. When people can spend their whole days doing nothing, they try to pass the time by gossiping! Now, if you'll give me that money, I'll go and buy the fish. I'll go myself, because I want to have my choice. I'll work like a horse to carry it all the way back!"

"Get the fishmonger to bring it home."

"No, no; I wouldn't trust him! D'you remember when he changed those mullets for



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us, and sent us the bad ones, after I'd gone to the trouble of choosing them myself, one by one, all fresh? One can't trust them. Give me that money, otherwise, if I wait much longer, someone else will buy them."

Giulio took twenty lire from his purse, and Enrico snatched them as if he'd won them by cheating, remarking:

★ "The Cavaliere is always talking about that child of his which he thinks is his own. There's not a greater fool than he is on this earth."

And all three of them burst out laughing.



## V

MODESTA was an easy-going creature, who lived only for her home ; she could do nothing beyond that, and she could understand nothing more than that. Healthy, and full of energy, she passed the days, one after the other, at home, doing infinitely more work than the servant who helped her. To persuade her to come out for a walk, her nieces would have to try all sorts of expedients before they finally succeeded. She was as tall as Niccolo, and not less massive and well-built. Her husband and her brothers-in-law filled her house with provisions and eatables ; and all she had to occupy her mind was the cooking of them. Nevertheless she suspected some secret ; she guessed that they were hiding something from her, and she was no longer as quiet and happy as she had once been.

While Niccolo was giving a last rub to his face and hands with his towel after his morning wash she asked him :

"Why are you always complaining that the bookshop doesn't pay, and yet we are living like wealthy people, as if we had piles of money?"

Niccolo feared her curiosity, but he faced it boldly.

"You mind your own business. My wife must not ask questions like that." *why not?*

She wanted to be equally bold, but she only laughed. Then, with his usual morning vivacity, he continued :

“ Women have their knitting and darning to think of.”

She had lost her boldness, but she decided that she would not keep quiet.

“ I am sure you are not telling me the truth.”

Niccolo laughed more loudly.

“ I have seen you thoughtful and preoccupied too often ; and too often I’ve heard you say—over and over again—that we might one day find ourselves in difficulties.”

“ Don’t make me cross so early in the morning. I got up so cheerful, and you want to spoil it all for me.”

“ Don’t be funny ! ”

“ And don’t you be naughty ! ”

“ I am not being naughty ; I am really cross.”

“ How can I reason with you ? Am I to cure you of your bad temper ? I told you to let me dress in peace. I ask it of you as a favour.”

She went off to the kitchen to prepare his chocolate, while he hurried to finish his toilet before she came back. Modesta would not have risked insisting, except that her real anxiety gave her strength, so that when his chocolate was prepared she took it to him in his room instead of calling him downstairs, that they should be alone. She ventured again :

"I shall go and speak to the Cavaliere Nicchioli to-day."

"Go and speak to whom you please!"

Niccolo still wished to be gentle with her, hoping that her fears and doubts would cease. He wouldn't have felt so sure of himself if he had not thought of his brothers. He looked worried, and, in his hurry to go, he gulped down his chocolate, regardless of the fact that it scalded his tongue at each gulp.

"In spite of my love for you, and all the years we've been married, you still try to hide from me what anyone would guess by looking at your face. I warn you I am not joking."

"You're threatening me? Well—now you won't be able to say you're the good wife I thought you were, that you used to boast of being."

She was breathless, but not discouraged. Her husband could not be lying to her, and she had been silly to suppose such a thing. But, all the same, she was not yet convinced. She had absurd and headstrong ideas about things; for example, she would dream of lucky numbers for the lottery and would play them time after time, in spite of all argument.

At this point, then, she decided to tackle Enrico about it, and thought the matter over while preparing his bread and butter and coffee. She had better not speak to Giulio yet, for he would repeat it all to her husband.

Enrico always dissembled his feelings towards her, and was generally taciturn and sombre. He would speak to her distantly, usually abruptly and impolitely. Seeing him enter on this particular morning more morose than ever, she hesitated for a moment, fearing to be too severely rebuffed. However, she persevered in her intentions and asked :

“How is business going at the shop?”

“Isn't your husband here? Why don't you ask him? Why d'you ask me? This milk is not so good as usual.”

“Niccolo wouldn't tell me anything when I asked him.”

“So you turn to me?”

“I'll get to know it, anyway.”

“Women always do get what they want.”

“Then it won't be difficult.”

“Do let me have my breakfast in peace. You've put mighty little butter on this bread. I'll have to go and do that myself too, if I want it well done. The less I want to speak to you the more you come and worry me.”

By this time she no longer knew what to think: whether she was wrong in suspecting anything, or whether there was indeed cause for her to do so. He was looking at her with contempt, sullenly, and with hostile severity, as if he thoroughly hated her. Sometimes he really was most annoying, and she disliked him intensely. Then she would reproach herself;

she ought not and must not be angry with her own brother-in-law. She thought she would appeal to his better nature, but he no sooner guessed her intention than he said :

what  
nature

"Please leave off and go away."

She obeyed, regretting that she had been simple enough to believe that he would listen to her.

Enrico, instead of taking his usual morning walk, went straight away to the bookshop and said to Niccolo :

"It seems to me that your wife is giving herself airs."

"What has she been saying to you?"

"I suppose she first asked you what she afterwards asked me."

In order not to appear weak in his brother's estimation, Niccolo hastily replied :

"She took good care not to mention anything to me."

"D'you think I'm a fool? Much better come to an agreement, and all have the same reply ready. And when Giulio comes in we'll ask him too."

"Really and truly, I don't see how we can blame her."

"I say we can, most decidedly. Don't be sentimental."

"We'll all three speak to her to-day. You may be sure I didn't let the tiniest word escape me."

## Three Crosses

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"Fine thing if you had. You'd have been caught in a nice old hole."

"No fear. I'm artful enough for her, even though she is a woman."

"Just for the very reason that she's a woman, we must be doubly careful. And we must put her in her right place straightaway."

"I hardly allow her to breathe as it is."

"It seems that you do, otherwise she wouldn't have dared to attack me while I was having breakfast. I wasn't expecting it."

"You can set your mind at rest; she doesn't know anything. I'd choke her sooner than that."

4 stop  
"I've always been nice to her, as a brother-in-law should be, but I can't let a thing like this pass unnoticed."

"I'll look after my own wife myself, don't you worry. I'm quite capable of it."

When they spoke of the incident to Giulio he exclaimed: "We're done for! No more escape for us. Women are more cunning than the devil. Whoever would have dreamt that that silly little quiet thing—— I'll bet she overheard one of our conversations. Last night we were talking in the dark. Perhaps she was listening."

Niccolo decided:

"To-day, before sitting down to our meal, we'll make her feel sorry for it."

"Without much regard for her feelings either," said Enrico.



Giulio objected :

“Much better do things kindly.”

Enrico retorted :

“Very well, then, I won’t have anything to do with it. Manage for yourselves.”

Giulio asked, as if he were wondering aloud to himself :

“Is it better to do things kindly or harshly ?”

Enrico answered :

“I’ve always heard it said——”

But Niccolo interrupted :

“I’ll manage myself. That’s enough. You can be present if you like, and help me if you think it necessary.”

Enrico shook his head and went out. But Giulio was sorry and full of regret in making things unpleasant for his sister-in-law.

“Now I wonder who on earth put that into her mind. I hardly think she could have thought of it herself. She’s always as quiet as a lamb. There’s never been the least doubt or discussion.”

“It’s only an idea she has got into her head. I guarantee she really knows nothing whatever.”

“I hope not.”

At noon Niccolo called her into the sitting-room, and sent the two nieces out of hearing into the kitchen with the servant. Then he tackled the subject.

“We are all three very surprised at the way



you spoke to us this morning. Aren't we? You tell her too."

Modesta suddenly felt totally unable to defend herself. It was only her instinct which insisted that she was right. Personally, she would have preferred ruin in real earnest rather than stand here like this. She wouldn't have expected her husband to reproach her in this way before his two brothers. If she had been alone with him she would probably have gone down on her knees to beg his pardon ; as it was, she felt her legs failing her, as if they could no longer support her weight. She was dismayed, and at the same time astonished. She was far from divining that, in reality, Giulio would willingly have begged her pardon, and that Enrico, from sheer cowardice, would have been ready—more than either of the other two—to reveal to her the whole secret. Niccolo felt for her an affection which almost approached adoration. She thought them all three indignant and exceedingly angry with her. If she could but have uttered half a word of justification none of the three would have dared look her in the face. She could not guess this, however, and as soon as she had recovered a little she whispered :

"You mustn't take any notice of me."

Enrico answered :

"That's all I wanted to know ; I'm satisfied."

Niccolo added :

"Next time you'll be more careful."

Giulio said nothing, because he felt ashamed.

And so Modesta, overwhelmed with a sudden surprising happiness, went to the kitchen to tell the nieces that they could bring in the soup for dinner.

During the meal, by her own example, she kept the others merry and talkative ; she felt a happiness and a sense of relief such as she had never experienced. It seemed to her too good ; she was too happy ; she felt almost as if she was drunk with it ; and yet she had had less wine even than usual.

Niccolo was pleased with her, and made fun of Giulio for being so serious. He had presentiments that they would soon not laugh any more, and, with a sudden attack of his boisterous hilarity, he would have liked to insult everyone. His laugh lacked sincerity and depth, but it was light and airy, full of impatience, and, to an observant listener, rather like a shudder. At intervals it was loud and slow and insolently easy. His voice sparkled with laughter, and his eyes shone with it, arousing all Enrico's rudeness and Giulio's incurable shyness. The prevalent gaiety became so hysterical that, at moments, even the plates seemed to clatter with merriment. Everything became ridiculous and pleasant.

Giulio protested :

"This is too much !"

Chiarina and Lola cried in unison :

“No, no!—don’t stop!”

Only Enrico succeeded in calming them down, saying : “I don’t like all this excitement.”

Although Niccolo was ready with a coarse reply, they laughed less and in a more subdued manner. Enrico continued :

“I knew you were the most foul-mouthed of the three, but for goodness sake keep your low remarks for the shop, and don’t blurt them out before the girls. Keep your mouth in your plate, and shut up.”

“If you don’t want to listen——”

Giulio intervened :

“Don’t let’s take all this nonsense too seriously. Let’s drink our healths in a glass of wine, and forget your inclination to squabble. It’s much better to enjoy oneself than to quarrel.”

Niccolo feigned repentance, with a comical look that renewed the laughter. His two nieces gazed at him with childish admiration, almost swept away by his cleverness and vivacity.

Modesta rose from the table and went to his chair. Standing behind it, she took his head and kissed it. He started and rubbed the spot with his napkin; then, pushing her away with an energetic hand, he remarked :

“You mustn’t take such liberties. Can’t you behave yourself?”

## VI

As Chiarina and Lola grew up their affection for one another increased.

They were plain, short, thick-set, and both were too fat. They were very much alike, and Chiarina was the elder. They dressed simply, and helped to make their own clothes, and there was nothing charming or graceful about them at all. They always whispered to one another, even if they were alone, thinking, apparently, that their thoughts and conversations were much too dull and uninteresting to be spoken aloud, and must needs be kept hidden. When their aunt would sometimes come upon them unawares, during one of their conversations, they would give shy little laughs, and with silent glances would pledge each other's secrecy. Their extreme simplicity and innocence made them like this. They would say to themselves they would not be so shy, but learn to talk openly, as sensible grown-up people; although sometimes they felt that their friendship could brook of absolutely no intrusion. They liked to think of the same things in exactly the same way, and they often declared to themselves that they would always remain so, not wishing anything better in the world.

Both the girls were fond of country walks,

and their aunt would take them out of the city by some quiet, lonely road about twice a week.

They used to pass by their High School, and they would glance inside to see if they could see the headmistress or one of the girls. After that glance they would giggle, and walk away rapidly, arriving at Porta Tufi while their aunt was still half-way down the hill.

They would stop and, linking arms, would turn round to look at the long brick wall of the school garden, over the top of which some ivy hung in bedraggled streamers. Opposite, a lower wall strove to keep back a field which seemed to be flowing over it. Above the archway of the Porta, on the outside, is an old and faded sundial, without its gnomon. Over it there is another higher arch, of grey stone, built up when the entrance was reconstructed and repaired. On either side, and joining on to the Porta, stretch dark red walls marked with an occasional yellowish splash, and behind these vines and olives grow. All was so quiet and silent that even at so slight a sound as a sudden rustle among the leaves, when some peasant, perhaps, would lean a ladder against a tree, the girls would step more to the middle of the road and look around them in surprise. One of the walls, in which there is a small wooden gate protected by a little roof sloping away on either side, runs past a dark

red house with narrow windows looking on to the Cimitero della Misericordia. But the two girls, after asking their aunt's permission, always took the Strada del Mandorlo. There, among the olive-trees, and beyond a brick wall low enough on which to rest comfortably, Siena can be again seen.

On this afternoon, as usual, they had stopped at this point and waited for their aunt. The sky was all grey, but clear, and every now and then the sun's rays pierced the clouds, outlining them with dazzling light.

Below the Monte Amiata the landscape became uninteresting, dull and uniform. The hilly outlines gradually disappeared, and even the cypresses were veiled in the universal grey-ness. The walls sank into the yellow earth through the tall, coarse grass of the roadside ditches. Siena lies heavily on its height, quite detached from its walls, which at this point, and from this view, appear almost straight. Towards Porta San Marco, however, its aspect acquires a more eccentric outline. The pointed spire of the Carmine is the only salient feature among the mass of the city's roofs.

As they continued their walk down the slope, the girls heard the echo of their own footsteps, as the road became narrower and the walls higher. Just beyond Porta Romana the hill broadens out, spreading its fields and meadows all around, into the open country. Farther



away a few purple heights are crowned with rows of dark cypresses.

Without a word, and almost breathless, they stopped at a villa whose front was badly damaged and discoloured by dampness. It had a false window and green shutters, and several patches of mortar on its walls stood out like large white splashes thrown on haphazard.

A lame postman passed them, his pipe down-turned in his mouth and his dilapidated bag slung across his shoulders. In his hand he held a handkerchief full of snails.

Chiarina and Lola grinned. Farther down they met two priests: one small and thick-set, the other tall and dry as an olive stone. The two girls laughed.

They went farther, and arrived at another house, which was buttressed up with brick reinforcements reaching to the roof. Its whole façade was yellow with lichen. Here the walls on either side of the road were crooked and bent, swollen and cracked, as if they were always on the point of collapsing.

Chiarina and Lola started to hum, but their voices were untrained and they could not keep time, so they found themselves continually breaking off and beginning afresh. Their thoughts were fixed on nothing particular, and their aunt presently interrupted them:

“Don’t walk too far; you’ll get so hot.”



"Shan't we go as far as the Cappella?" Lola asked.

"It's too far, and besides it is all up-hill coming back."

"Never mind that. Don't worry. We'll carry you."

Modesta was absent-minded. Her thoughts wandered back to yesterday's encounter with her husband and brothers-in-law. It had been a mistake on her part which might easily have ended in a quarrel. And although she still felt sorry for it and regretted the whole incident, she felt at the same time much calmer and more assured. So, for once, her instinct had deceived her.

The two girls insisted on prolonging the walk; they had a great secret to impart to their aunt, and they wished to gain time and prepare the way for the disclosure. Of course it was clearly Chiarina's duty to speak, as the secret concerned her; but they had not yet made up their minds about it. It would be so much better if they both spoke; they would help each other and be the braver for it.

"You tell her," Chiarina begged Lola. "I'd much rather. I should feel I was being too daring if I told her myself, just for the very reason that it's about me specially."

"Well, suppose I was going to get engaged, what would *you* do?"

"You know; *I* would tell her. I shall cry about it all presently."

"Then wait till we're back home."

"We'll wait so long that in the end we'll never tell her. Look at those lovely ripe blackberries!"

"We'd have to jump right over to get them."

"It's dangerous, we'd better not."

They had arrived at the end of the Strada del Mandorlo, and were at the Cappella. Opposite them, over a large hedge of brambles, were twenty cypresses, all of unequal height. The Cappella looks like a hut, with two small stone steps leading to the door and a rusty old iron grating across the tiny window. Two statuettes, or rather two puppets of worn-out stone, one of San Bernardino and the other of Santa Caterina, were balanced on the edge of the crumbling tiles.

"Do they ever say Mass here, I wonder?"

"Why, there would only be room for the priest."

"Of course. I'm sure that they stand outside to listen to Mass, where we're standing now."

Farther down, between two cypresses, where another road joined this one, stood a wooden cross with a painted cock on the top. Two peasant women sitting at the foot of the cross were sharing an apronful of grapes.

When Chiarina and Lola were younger they used always to stop here and say an Ave Maria

or two. Even now they felt embarrassed, standing there; embarrassed and confused, almost lost, as if the cross were sternly forbidding them to remain there alone without their aunt.

"Wouldn't it be better if you didn't think of becoming engaged yet?"

Chiarina turned her back on the cross and moved away a few steps.

"Why do you mention it here, of all places?"

"Is it a sin to talk of it here?"

"I think so."

"Let's go away, then, at once."

But Chiarina hesitated between fear of the cross and her own wish to speak.

"Perhaps auntie would like to rest here a little," she said.

"Then for goodness' sake don't make such a fuss of it all. If auntie stops here to rest, I'll tell her about it straightaway. It's to-day or never."

"Yes; but I warn you if she doesn't like it, and gets angry, the fault will be yours."

"All right. I'll take the blame."

Modesta arrived, rather out of breath. Lola took her arm and announced:

"Auntie, Chiarina has something to tell you."

"And must you speak for her?"

"She can't tell it you by herself."

"When will you stop being so foolish? As if you were not already fifteen years old and Chiarina seventeen."

## *Three Crosses*

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At this Chiarina, without any warning, ran across to Lola and punched her quite hard.

"Oh, don't! You've hurt me."

"Well, why don't you shut up?"

"I'd like to know what is the matter with you two. What are you plotting together?"

"Chiarina will tell you herself. I don't even want to listen."

But Chiarina, after hitting her sister, burst into tears, despite the fact that the two women at the foot of the cross were looking on with interest.

"I don't want to upset myself over you two," said Modesta, recalling the events of the day before. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You're grown-up now, and are no longer babies. You're old enough to think of a husband."

Lola laughed.

"A husband?" she asked.

Modesta reflected, trying to decide whether she had said anything inappropriate. But Lola continued, so seriously, and at the same time with such agitation, that she felt a sudden nervous tension all over her body, even to the tips of her toes:

"That's exactly what Chiarina wanted to tell you."

Her sister stopped crying and relieved her agitation by raining blows on Lola's head and shoulders. Modesta rescued the younger sister and asked Chiarina:

## *Three Crosses*

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"Is that true?"

Lola, in revenge, answered for her sister, eagerly, with tears in her voice:

"It's true! It's true!"

Then Chiarina, completely at a loss, and wishing intensely to hide herself, embraced her sister tightly; so tightly that she trembled. Lola, at once repentant at having snatched at revenge so eagerly, returned her embrace, and held her closely as if she would never again let her go.

Modesta, even though those two women were laughing with amusement, put her arms round both the girls and kissed them.

And Lola explained how a young man, a clerk at the Borough Offices, had succeeded in letting Chiarina know that he was about to ask for permission to become engaged to her. They apparently loved one another.

They turned back and started for home, excited and happy. Modesta had been made to promise that she would say nothing as yet to any of the uncles. But that same night she told Giulio about it, and he, rubbing his chin, replied:

"We must be very careful and find out who he is."

Modesta asked: "Shall I tell Niccolo about it too?"

"I should suggest waiting. Niccolo would make fun of the whole thing, and goodness knows how he'd tease Chiarina."

### *Three Crosses*

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Chiarina was overcome by shyness ; she could hardly be persuaded by her sister to join the others at table, and when she did so she wondered why Uncle Giulio was so much more thoughtful than usual.

Lola, after the meal, asked her : " Will you play my accompaniments on the piano ? "

" Oh no ! I couldn't play just now. "

" *Dio mio !* How absurd you are. It's ridiculous. "

" I'm restless, and it worries me. I feel I want something to distract my mind from everything. "

" Well, then, come to the piano and play for me. "

" It would make me feel worse. "

" Close your eyes, " Lola suggested.

" I can't. "

" I'll close them for you with my hand. Now, do you feel better ? "

But Chiarina wished to rise above her sensations. " It's difficult even for me to understand what is the matter with me, " she said.

" Let's go to bed earlier. "

" No. I want to stay in the dark with the window open. I'll try that and see. "

From their bedroom window they had a view of the country between Porta Oville and Porta Pispini. But it was now getting too dark to see, and the country was turning from an impenetrable uniform grey to black. Only



on the horizon, where the sky and the earth met, stretched a long beam of clearer and purer colour, but even that faint glimmer was dying out. The breeze rustled the trees in the gardens and orchards among the surrounding houses within the walls of Siena. Every now and then a shutter was closed with a bang, and a tiny, patient, sharp little echo at the bottom of some garden somewhere faithfully repeated the noise each time, and lost itself in the distance amongst the half-buried arches of the Follonica fountain, all covered with moss, and worn away with the constant lapping of the slimy waters.

In the surrounding silence the leaves of a large lime-tree rustled as they fell, one by one, beneath the bedroom window as if they never would cease.

Lola was in the parlour poring over one of her school books, and Chiarina, by the window, turned her head to look long and fixedly at the ebony and ivory crucifix which hung over the bed, the one that had been given to her for her first Communion.

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## VII

GIULIO attached all due importance to the news which his sister-in-law had imparted to him. But in his own mind he failed to see how he could pretend that the girl would have even the tiniest of dowries. He was curious to meet the young man in question, and, from one day to another, he expected him to call at the bookshop to speak to him; as, of course, since he was the eldest of the three brothers, it was certain that he would be the first to be approached. But then, as the days passed, he refused to worry over it too much; he was convinced now that things always went wrong with him in any case, and he therefore retired within his shell and didn't even wish his bad luck to change; he lost all sense of will-power. However, after a while, he thought it best to ask his brothers' advice. Enrico declared at once that he did not believe it and that it was probably nothing but women's gossip and fancies, and Niccolo guaranteed that it certainly wasn't worth while bothering about. Giulio, then, left alone, promised himself that he would do his utmost for Chiarina and for her future. All his manly feelings uppermost, he felt a certain satisfaction in action which coincided with his own conscience, and seemed—or so he believed—

to give him some unselfish motive, and to take him out of himself. He had never exerted himself to accomplish anything for a moral purpose, and now that an occasion presented itself he was not going to let it pass.

He tried again to speak of it to Niccolo, and said to him :

"You're so fond of those two girls, and I don't for a moment doubt your sincerity, and yet you now refuse to consider seriously the possibility of one of them settling down comfortably. Why is that?"

"Giulio, you know I don't understand these little absurd things."

"Why shouldn't you?"

"Because, from now onward, the nearer we get to the precipice the more I want to concern myself with nothing but eating and drinking."

"It seems to me that the one thing need not necessarily exclude the other."

"What should I do then?"

"Well, as this young man is a clerk at the Borough Offices, and as you know his manager, you might make some inquiries about him."

Niccolo burst out laughing :

"Do you really think I could do it? Do I look like it?"

Then he continued violently, rising to his feet and striking his chest with his open hand :  
"If this young man is looking for a dowry, then he's making a great mistake. There isn't

any dowry, and he won't ever see any. Let him look for another girl to become engaged to."

Then, his voice struggling with his sharp, short and almost threatening laughs, he cried:

"Do you think he'd marry her without a dowry? Ah! I don't think so. He would be a great fool. And I'd be the first to tell him so. You *would* insist on sending her to school too; she ought to have entered a convent instead and taken the veil. I always did say so. And I'm not quite a fool."

"It's useless for you to think of these things now, isn't it?"

"Very well, then, you do as you like. I'll keep my own opinions."

And again he laughed, still more sharply. As he laughed, a young man entered the shop; a fairly well-dressed young man, wearing eye-glasses, and with a reddish moustache. Niccolo asked him, with a sarcastic smile:

"Do you want a book?"

"I wanted to speak to one of you. I don't know which."

"Speak to my brother."

And, buttoning up his coat, he went out abruptly.

Giulio came from behind his desk and the young man introduced himself:

"I am Bruno Pallini, an accountant, and I have been employed at the Borough Offices of Siena for over a year."

Giulio, bowing, answered :

"Please tell me what I can do for you."

The young man was silent for a moment. Then he said: "You know . . . this is the first time I've ever spoken to you. Please excuse me. I beg the honour of becoming engaged to the Signorina Chiarina."

His eyes were very bright, and even his eyeglasses trembled. He waited anxiously for the bookseller to break the silence.

"There can be no objection if my niece consents to it, provided you are still of the same mind even if—the actual conditions—of the girl—are a little humble."

Without hesitation the young man replied excitedly: "Oh, I won't hear anything about that."

"Then—the whole thing is possible. I'll speak to her aunt and to herself to-day."

"When would you like me to call again?"

"At your own convenience—this evening, to-morrow morning. Perhaps to-morrow morning would be better."

The young man would have liked to stay longer, but as he could find nothing to say, he smiled shyly and awkwardly, shook hands and took his leave.

Giulio remained standing on the same spot, fidgeting with his eyeglasses. Then he wondered: "What next?"

At this moment Nisard entered, very bright

## Three Crosses

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and elegant ; in his hand he carried a chrysanthemum that looked like gold, together with a roll of manuscript.

"Am I disturbing you?"

"On the contrary, I am very pleased to see you. Just half-a-minute ago a gentleman called here to ask for my niece's hand ; for Chiarina's."

Nisard, who loved to make compliments, exclaimed :

"I am sorry to have arrived late ! I should have been so pleased to make his acquaintance."

"He looked very nice and serious. I think he must be a Southerner, like most of the Government employees here."

"Is he wealthy?"

"I didn't ask him."

Nisard felt that they had spoken enough on the subject, and remarked :

"I came to inquire if you had a number of *The Burlington Magazine*, containing a critical study on Sassetta, by Berenson. Pardon me if I interrupt by asking for what interests me."

"We'll look at once and see if we can find it."

"I am not in a hurry."

Niccolo now reappeared, smiling broadly, and sat down on his favourite chair without a word.

"That was the man who wanted to ask us about Chiarina," Giulio said to him.

"I knew it. Therefore I made myself scarce."



Then Nisard asked him jokingly, with a voice as sharp as needles, and with a smile which sparkled as smoothly and cleanly as did his own always bright and always new shoes :

“And you—are you pleased about it?”

Niccolo looked at him squarely, laughing ; his laugh now was calm, but always mocking. He pushed his hat farther down on his head, right over his eyes, so that the eyebrows were hidden under it, and answered Nisard :

“Do you think I’d bother about weddings?”

Nisard, with a voice that sounded almost womanish, begged him not to make fun of his niece too. And he remained with his smile suspended, waiting to resume it until the book-seller should have replied. Then he laughed outright, as if he were being literally tickled, moving his shoulders up and down and rubbing his hands.

“Oh, don’t! It’s too much! Only you would say such things.”

Giulio, with his deprecatory smile—which lost itself immediately in his voice—answered :

“One really mustn’t pay attention to anything he says.”

But Niccolo, with a sour and scornful laugh, exclaimed : “I don’t understand these things.” Then his head drooped, and soon he was asleep and snoring.

Nisard turned over the pages of the magazine on the counter ; then, when he had looked

through it, picked it up, and dug the point of his stick into Niccolo's knees to wake him and take his departure. Niccolo would not wake. Only when he heard that Nisard had left the shop did he open his eyes and yawn loud and long, again and again, almost like a donkey braying, and then said :

"I can't understand why pictures should be kept in a museum and not given to me to sell. My dear Giulio, without a picture by some genuine painter we shall always be poor."

Giulio replied thoughtfully :

"I know. But then, what can one do? See if you can't secure one from where they are kept, all locked up and safe."

"There you are! And we are obliged to keep up an industry of false antiques, like any old fraud."

He laughed with the sound of a trombone, and, opening his mouth for another loud yawn, he continued :

"Once upon a time one could at least search the country round. Now the Government has catalogued everything, without giving so much as a thought to our trade. They've ruined us all."

Then, in a more easy and natural voice :

"Tell me at least what he said to you."

"Who?"

"The man who called about Chiarina."

"Oh, I'd forgotten about that."

Niccolo seemed overcome with impatience :

"What did he say to you?"

But they both looked towards the door at the sound of the handle being turned ; it was the Cavaliere Nicchioli. Niccolo hastily closed his eyes again.

The Cavaliere was very gay and festive :

"I've just met Nisard," he said, "and he told me that your Chiarina is about to become engaged. I congratulate you, even though . . . my little boy . . . has just developed a slight cough . . . rather a bad one."

Giulio smiled :

"I am sure that by to-morrow all Siena will know that a young man has called to ask my consent."

"Oh, everyone will know. Just imagine: I've just been talking to two friends of mine, who knew why I'd had to change our maid . . . who wasn't . . . quite loving enough . . . to my little boy."

"It's an extraordinary thing."

"Siena is made like that, and nothing will ever change it, God willing. But then I wouldn't like living in Siena if it were not possible to learn all that one wants to learn about one's neighbours. Why don't I like large cities? Principally because I couldn't exist without knowing everybody else as well as I know myself. It's a natural curiosity that's born in us. And nothing will ever

eradicate it. As a matter of fact, if I had my way, I would rather not have anyone here who wasn't a native. What do they want here? We are quite comfortable by ourselves, all being equal and of the same stock. Is Niccolo really asleep?"

The Cavaliere's voice sounded rather foolish, and at the same time ingratiating and rather flabbily weak.

Giulio replied :

"I think so. He is hardly ever anything else?"

"Tell me who the young man is."

"I've not had time yet to make any inquiries about him."

"What are you waiting for? Would you like me to take the matter up? I'll do it with real pleasure. Tell me his name."

He scribbled down the name in his notebook, and went out, saying :

"In an hour's time . . . you will know exactly . . . how old he is . . . what family he comes from . . . and if he is worth while considering as a possible husband for your niece. You leave it to me."

Giulio, when the Cavaliere was gone, asked his brother : "Were you really asleep?"

"I was even dreaming," Niccolo boasted.

The bookshop was always rather dark and the gas had to be lighted early. In the street they could see the same familiar persons passing, and one now and again would stop to

look into the shop-window. Niccolo, who from his favourite corner was watching the passers-by, became interested, and gossipped about them to his brother :

“That man over there is that crazy creature who had to fly from Siena when it was discovered that he had stolen his cousin’s inheritance, which, of course, couldn’t come to him by rights. . . . One of those two ladies, the ugly one, is the wife of a certain man who forced his father-in-law to pay all his debts. . . . There is the countess who never wants women among her staff of servants . . . and oh ! there’s the marchesa whose husband is openly betraying her with their children’s governess. . . . Do you know who that priest is? He is a canon of the Duomo : they say that his mistress is the aunt of that man who was in here the other day to buy all those chemistry books. . . . That is the mistress of the baron who is always in a motor car . . . wait a minute and you’ll see him pass too. . . . There he is ! Didn’t I tell you, Giulio ? You see, it’s true. . . .” And he clapped his hands in satisfaction. “I’ll wager they came out on purpose to see each other,” he went on. “Oh, and there *is* the governess who is betraying the marchesa. She’s young. You can see that she must be his mistress. You’ve only got to look at her face. There’s no mistaking it, you can easily tell. You see how I know everything. And did

you notice how worried the marchesa looked? . . . See, there is that young woman who paints herself. . . . I hear that she is kept by that count, the very wealthy one, who owns the estates at Poggibonsi. I believe it. Otherwise, who could afford to buy her dresses like those? And her father is quite satisfied about it. I know that too. The person who told me has known her since she was a child. . . . How disgusting that old woman is! I can't even look at her. How she mumbles! She hasn't a single tooth left. . . . At least the baronessa, who is always out walking with the officers, has had false ones put in. She went to an American dentist who lives in Florence. She spent a fabulous sum." Suddenly his brow darkened, and he muttered: "Here comes that ill-bred rascal."

It was Enrico, more lame than usual. Niccolo asked him :

"What do you want?"

"What I please."

"He's quite right," said Giulio in his defence.

"Nisard has just told me that that young man called about his engagement."

"Do *you* know it too?"

"Do *I* know it! Isn't she *my* niece as well? But tell me your impressions."

"Neither good nor bad."

"Does he speak well? Was he well-mannered?"



### *Three Crosses*

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"He's a little dandy ; red-haired, subdued and rather anæmic, but quite decent."

"I can't understand why he should be the very one to put in an appearance. Let's hope it means good luck. Anyway, he's the first one and the only one ; we haven't even the bother of a choice."

"And who can decide whether one ought to say yes or no to him ?"

"If they're in love, I should advise not sending him away. And you, Niccolo, did you see him ?"

Niccolo did not answer, and started dusting the wooden chest. Enrico continued :

X "I'd sooner hang a millstone round my neck and drown myself than marry."

"Not everyone is like you."

"Because not everyone is as artful as I am."

And with his voice changing as it usually did when he wanted to prepare the way to something specially good, he continued :

"Nice thing to go and get married. Then everybody would say of me as they say of everyone else, that I was being made a fool of."

He spluttered and laughed shrilly, almost like a squeaking mouse.

## VIII

✓ ENRICO had been one of those impertinent and brazen-faced boys for whom neighbours usually predict nothing good. His brothers, however, through continually threatening him with expulsion from home, had managed to instil a few ideas of common-sense into him. Nevertheless his character had lately become more and more intractable. He had found that he could make himself fairly comfortable at home, especially after Niccolo had married, and he had therefore always tried to get on as well as he could with the others. True, he had sometimes attempted to make his will law, to be implicitly obeyed, but, being less intelligent than the others, especially as compared with Giulio, he had always been compelled finally to give way. In his own intimate thoughts he had a very good opinion of himself, and he never wished to be disapproved of, or blamed for any of his actions. But he was convinced, all the same, that his brothers always spoke ill of him, even before strangers, and that was the cause of his general attitude towards life: an extreme and invariable mistrust.

★ Now that the payment of another bill was rapidly approaching, and of a large bill too, even he was uneasily aware of the increasing

difficulty of finding the money to meet it, or even to lessen it by the payment of a fifth part of the total, following the usual method adopted by the brothers in a crisis.

"Giulio," he ventured, "you have always managed things well and prudently ; you must suggest a way out of the difficulty this time too. It's absolutely necessary."

He knew that Giulio had nothing to suggest ; nevertheless he feigned unlimited faith in his abilities.

"There's nothing for it now but to place our trust in God," Giulio replied. +

"What has God to do with it? Don't joke about it." And he left his brother angrily to his own perplexities, thinking to himself scornfully that he surely could not find a way out this time. Meeting Niccolo outside, he said to him :

"I always knew that fool would end by compromising us as well." ] ☆

Niccolo defended his elder brother and replied :

"You'd better not talk about it to me."

Enrico muttered his usual flow of invective, and sought consolation in a tavern and a game of cards. He usually played after supper, well into the night. He remarked to his friends :

"It's very unfortunate to have such an ass of a brother who understands nothing."

His friends did not take much notice of his

grievances, and certainly did not bother to wonder whether he was right or wrong; he could therefore give vent to his feelings to his heart's content. Every time he played a card he asked someone, without ever getting a reply from any of them:

"What would you do with a brother like mine? Wouldn't it be better to be born an only son? Wouldn't you think I could find a way to enforce respect, even if it meant going to the law courts?"

After several games his turn came to shuffle the cards. But he kept the pack in his hand and said: "You all think that I lead such a comfortable life, don't you? Well, I don't. I swear to you, on my oath, that I never have a single day's peace. But how can I separate from my brothers? We've been living together so long now that I have grown too old. But may I be skinned alive if I can think that any one of you would endure such a life. Don't you believe me? *I* stand it because I let them do what they like, and I give in to them too much. I'm too mild! They treat me as they would a schoolboy. That's always been a fault of mine."

He looked genuinely pained, just as he would when he complained of the torments of gout.

"You see," he continued, "I come here to play cards, and to have a little wine, because I

need distraction. I have no other consolation. From morning till night I have no other relief. Can you blame me for it then? And yet, to hear *them*, I'm a despicable character, good for nothing, absolutely worthless. But I am especially angry with Giulio, who is responsible for all our affairs. Oughtn't he to be grateful to me if I of my own free will have withdrawn from them all and put myself completely aside?"

His friends didn't feel inclined to listen to him, and were shouting to him to shuffle his cards and get on with the game.

"No, I won't play any more to-day; I'm too upset." He put down the cards, and went to find the inn-keeper, to pour into his ear a renewed version of his grievances. The host, to please him, agreed with him, and he added, with satisfaction: "Everybody knows, for example, that I never set foot inside a theatre; it doesn't amuse me. Even to listen to the band on Sundays would bore me. I take a walk sometimes, always alone; and I never feel the need for anyone."

"Do you get on well with your sister-in-law?"

"Thanks to my own efforts. I never speak to her except when we're at table, and so I avoid any excuse for a squabble. And yet I don't complain. As a matter of fact, I never speak ill of her, and always abide by what the others say or do. With all that, they still find

plenty, to say about my behaviour and my character, and they couldn't be better."

"Niccolo is such a jolly fellow, though, isn't he? I think he must be very nice."

"Yes, when he thinks he will be. But never with me. I'll swear that he can't stand the sight of me. As for Giulio, he is too head-strong, and that's all there is to it. He never tells us what he is doing, and then he expects that I should be satisfied. If it were not for him, perhaps I could manage to settle down with Niccolo. I'm there all the time to think of everything. I do the marketing. I give the orders for the food. . . . I know I have ended by sacrificing myself, and by becoming unjust even to myself. It's my misfortune. I ought to have married and lived on my own. You'll see, one of these days, that they'll have to close the library and the bookbinding shop too. Which reminds me I must go and show myself, otherwise they'll both go off in a towering rage."

The inn-keeper by this time was giving his whole attention to three men who were grumbling because a litre of wine that they had ordered had been forgotten, and they were being kept waiting; he didn't even hear Enrico take his leave, although he had at first been quite interested in the gossip and the grievances of the latter.

Enrico did not enter the bookshop immediately, but stopped a moment outside, leaning



against the wall near the door. He had made up his mind to speak about his wrongs and insist on speedy redress; but now, as he tried to concentrate his thoughts for the occasion, he could find no plausible ground for his complaint. After all, he knew that perhaps he was not being sincere about it, and that, sifting the matter right to the bottom, he had absolutely nothing to grumble about. And, with an overwhelming feeling of loneliness, he entered the shop, where he knew he would find Nisard and Corsali. These two were friends of his brothers, but, suddenly and unaccountably, he wished them to be *his* friends too. Therefore, since here they both were, he immediately tried to say something that would attract their attention to himself.

When he wished to be especially affable he had a way of agreeing unconditionally with anything that was said; and, hearing Nisard declare that he much preferred Perugino to Pinturicchio, he chimed in:

"I quite agree with you. Bravo! It needed a foreigner to come here and tell us the truth."

Niccolo derided him: "What do you know about it at all?" he asked.

"I know as much as you do on the subject and perhaps more."

Niccolo gave one of his impressive and amusing laughs, and even Nisard laughed, like a flute out of tune.

Giulio inquired of Enrico: "What *is* the matter with you?"

Enrico looked at him resentfully.

"We'll soon see which of us two has the most brains," he replied. "And for something a good deal more serious than this. This is only a joke, and it doesn't matter, but I want to see you tackling circumstances in a few days' time. There's not long to wait. Besides, Nisard is much more competent than either of you, and I approved of his remarks."

Giulio turned pale, and felt pained and hurt. Enrico continued:

"I wash my hands of everything: I'll say that to you in front of any witness. We both know what I am referring to."

Corsali intervened:

"I see. This is one of your family squabbles. And are you ready to quarrel for such a trifle?"

"You be quiet; you don't know what I'm talking about. But the person who should hear this isn't deaf by any means. To one who knows, little need be said."

Giulio was overcome, and shrank visibly, lacking the courage even to try to hide his feelings. His pain caused his head to swim, and he could not hear a word of what was being said, although the speakers' voices were raised.

Niccolo clenched his fists in his coat-pockets to hide his anger.

Corsali again remarked:

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"I see. There is something quite important, which *will* come to light. Then, at any rate, wait until you are alone."

Nisard, seeing Giulio first so pale then the red in his cheeks turning purple, became serious, even though he failed to understand what was happening. He leaned against the writing-desk, with his head bent, waiting for the previous harmony and peace to be restored.

Corsali, with the best of intentions, continued :

"You know, now, we don't come at all willingly to your shop. You are always kicking up some fuss or other and it isn't pleasant. Say what you have to say to one another, but don't lose your tempers over it."

Nisard stayed on, and would not leave suddenly, so as not to appear impolite to Giulio. He felt that the latter was right, and he was irritated with Enrico ; nevertheless he did not show his feelings in any way, and he kept silent.

Enrico began again, turning to Giulio :

"Why don't you say openly the reason for my outburst? If you did talk about it now I wouldn't mind in the least."

"Do you wish to put *all* the blame on me?" Giulio suddenly asked.

Enrico would not risk a reply, and Giulio continued :

"I'll take it all. What do *you* think of it, Niccolo? I'd like to have your opinion too."

Niccolo winced, and, picking up his lighted cigar which had fallen from his lips, answered:

"I wish I could suffer with you. It would seem only right to me. But not everyone can feel things like that. Some suffer and weep; but I suffer and laugh instead."

Giulio, feeling the need of a word of sympathy, asked again:

"And what do you think of *him*?"

"By this evening it will seem impossible to him to have spoken to you as he has done."

But Enrico retorted:

"You're mistaken, both of you."

Niccolo appealed to Nisard:

"Will you do me a favour? Take him out of the shop."

Nisard approached Enrico and took him by the shoulder:

"Come out with me."

Enrico, almost flattered that Nisard should intervene, allowed himself to be led out. At first he was quiet, but then he broke out:

"You see how they treat me. If you hadn't been there they would have banged the door in my face."

Nisard preferred not to encourage these confidences, and made no reply. Enrico then, feeling conscious of his inferiority, announced, with barely veiled rudeness:

"Don't put yourself out for me. I'll go back

to the inn, where I was before. There I'll find my friends." *friends?*

Nisard was strongly inclined to rebuke him, but he only made a gesture of dissent and left him to his devices. Then he returned hurriedly to the bookshop.

Corsali was making foolish and senseless remarks, under the impression that it was his duty as a friend to have his say in the matter. Neither Giulio nor Niccolo paid any attention to him. Niccolo was examining his wooden chest from all angles and from all points of view as if something was wrong with it, and Giulio was trying to swallow his bitterness, and to realise it all in true proportions. Nisard announced with affectionate disdain :

"He has gone to play cards."

Corsali alone replied :

"That's his proper place."

Nisard shook hands with the two brothers, raised his hat to the agent and went. The remaining three were silent for a long time, and then with a hasty good-bye separated.

Enrico returned to the same table and found his friends still playing there. The game having begun, however, he was compelled to sit aside and look on. His thoughts were all about his two brothers, and it seemed to him that he had acted rightly. It seemed to him that he had played his cards well. And *they* did not even know the cards by name. *They* lacked the

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★ courage to come and play with him. He would henceforth have no more affection for Niccolo, and as for Giulio, he might as well not exist for all the notice that would be taken of him in the future. So he remained, musing, on a stool until dark, sitting with one leg crossed over the other, and sipping his wine, glass after glass. When he returned home, after he had sworn to himself that he would not be seen there again, he eagerly asked Modesta :

“ Have my brothers come back ? ”

“ They’re already sitting at table.”

“ I’ll come in at once too.”

He entered, and finding them already at their meal he apologised for being later than usual.

*retreat*



## IX

GIULIO seemed as if he were just recovering from a long illness. Emaciated, pale, and with an increased flabbiness in the skin of his face, it could easily be seen that he was overwrought and depressed.

Nisard called again the next day, but he noticed that the atmosphere in the book-shop was anything but serene.

"One should never allow oneself to feel worse than is necessary," he remarked.

Niccolo, who was dozing, opened his eyes and closed them again, accompanying the action with an impatient click of the tongue. Perhaps Nisard knew or guessed something? At that moment he did not even feel upset at the thought. Giulio's impulse was to try and find out the extent of Nisard's knowledge, if, indeed, there was any foundation of truth in his suspicion, but a second glance at Nisard sufficed to set his doubts at rest. Suddenly he took a book from one of the shelves behind him and, opening it at a page that was evidently familiar to him, he bade Nisard read the words which he underlined with his forefinger :

*Fili, sic dicas in omni re : Domine, si tibi  
placitum fuerit, fiat hoc ita.*

He replaced the book at once and asked :

"Don't you agree with the writer of that?"

The Frenchman would have contradicted him, but he was surprised that the bookseller should have asked him to read from *The Imitation of Christ*. It would have been neither tactful nor opportune to start an argument on such a theme for a mere pastime. So he merely nodded in reply. He guessed, however, that matters must be going very badly at the bookshop, and that the consequences must soon become apparent even to outsiders. If the brothers never mentioned such things to him, it merely meant that they distrusted him. He felt rather hurt at the consciousness of this distrust, but he consoled himself, saying: "Well, they alone know what is happening." Then, because he wished to feel happy on this particular day, he did not stay as long as usual, but took his leave almost at once.

Niccolo rose abruptly from his chair and stretched himself, expanding his chest to its utmost. His suggestions in emergencies were always childish, and on this occasion, when he was full of good intentions to help his brother out of their difficulties, they were so extremely impracticable that Giulio was obliged to ask him to desist. When he had stretched himself so thoroughly that he felt much taller than he really was, he began:

"Let us sell the bookshop to the first person that offers, and then we'll go and start some

other business. I'll go to Turin, Milan, Rome, and I'll find you a buyer. I'll bring him back with me, and the remedy will be found."

He clapped his hands together at the thought and then performed a pirouette that left the marks of his heels on the floor.

"And we mustn't lose time."

Giulio shook his head; his hands were in his trouser-pockets and his gaze was concentrated on the divers scribbles and sketches of his blotting-pad. His eyes acquired a luminous transparency, and were so sad that any observer, however indifferent, would have felt sorry for him.

After a while Niccolo came out with another proposal, even more seriously and earnestly than before:

"Let's ask Signor Riccardo Valentini to accept a bill for us."

"He would do it the first time, but not the second. Besides, the other bills are there, those real ones and the forged ones of Nicchioli."

"Of course, I hadn't thought of that. Then the best thing to do is to tell the Cavaliere."

"We could go on for another month or two perhaps, but what then?"

"We must hold out to the very last."

"We've already done all we can."

"Well, we'll just go on."

Giulio opened the drawer of his desk as if in

the hope of finding something that might be useful to him. He handled all the different bundles of papers that lay there, and with his finger-nails he tried to pick up a pin that had got fixed in one of the joins in the wood. When finally he succeeded, he began pricking his finger-tips with it.

Niccolo was ready with another proposal :

"Suppose we told everything, exactly how it stands, to the bank manager? I'll go. And I'll ask him to give us sufficient time to cover our deficiencies."

"I can't think how it is you don't realise that you're simply talking nonsense."

"I'll steal sooner than go to prison for forgery. No!—I'll commit suicide rather."

Giulio's depression was deepening, and he ended by feeling more compassion for his brother than he did for himself. With regard to Enrico, he thought him simply a fool.

Niccolo became excited and raised his voice more and more :

"Surely two men like ourselves can get out of this muddle? We'll set the whole of Siena laughing. I wonder how many kind souls will chuckle over it. But I don't care—as long as they don't come face to face with me. Yes, our bankruptcy will give great happiness to many of them."

"Hush! Don't mention the word."

Niccolo looked around him in alarm.

"Aren't we alone?" he asked, and giving his chair a sudden violent jerk he broke it. At this, hastily, like a man demented, he went out of the shop.

Giulio replaced the broken piece of the chair and fastened it with string.

Niccolo went running home, and while descending the Via del Re he almost slipped. As if he had indeed taken leave of his senses, on arriving home he kissed his nieces tremulously and said to his wife:

"Modesta, don't tire yourself with too much cooking. I don't want you to. You have a right to rest too sometimes. Give us bread, water and perhaps some raw onions, and I, for one, will wish for nothing more."

Modesta was frightened, and turned to look at her nieces in bewilderment.

"What is the matter with you? Are you feverish? Since when?" she stammered.

But he took no notice, and restlessly entered one room after another, only to come out again at once. The women were puzzled, failing to understand what he could be wanting.

Without stopping in his walk, he asked: "Chiarina, has your fiancé called yet?"

"He's coming this evening," the girl answered laughingly.

Her uncle patted her on the cheek and turned his eyes to the ceiling.

"Niccolo, what *is* the matter with you?"


You're making my heart jump. I'll send for the doctor."

"The doctor? There's no need. I just came to see how you all were, and to look for my hat. I thought I'd seen it hanging in this room."

He was still restless, moving to and fro unceasingly.

"Where are you going now?" his wife asked him.

She and the two girls were following him from room to room.



"What do *you* want, rather, all of you? Suppose I had made up my mind to go on living here alone for the future? Suppose I had got tired of my wife and of living with you all? There are too many of us anyhow."

Modesta, thinking it was all a joke, replied facetiously, although not yet totally reassured:

"If you want to leave me, I'm as happy about it as you are."

He laughed almost sobbingly, as if with a great effort. Then, suddenly realising his extraordinary state of mind, he continued laughing until he reached the door, and, sending his wife back into the house, he opened it and bolted down the stairs. He was asking himself the reason for such a whim and wondered at it. Meanwhile he had left Giulio alone in the shop. He went back to him, and as he entered asked: "What have you been doing while I was away?"



Giulio smiled.

"I've mended your chair, and I've started checking that parcel of books that arrived this morning."

"What are they like?"

"Novels; stories."

"Only fit for those who have nothing to think about. Rubbish!"

He bit his nails.

"I'd like to take a whip to all writers of books and set them dancing to the sound of blows."

"Don't talk nonsense."

"Have you forgotten all about the bill?"

"Let me breathe," begged Giulio, who had almost allowed it to slip from his mind.

"I see! I think more about it than you do."

"Why? What have you done? Have you found the money?"

"It's no use your being sarcastic," Niccolo retorted bitterly, but then, seeing that Giulio seemed calmer than before, he hoped that the whole thing had somehow been remedied. He waited, therefore, looking at Giulio expectantly for enlightenment. But Giulio replied despondently:

"This time we'll just slide to the very bottom, without even a chance of clutching at anything to save us. And you won't *yet* believe it."

"Up to the present Fortune has always helped us."

"But now she's failed us."

"Then it only means that we'll submit to our fate together. I'm not like Enrico."

"I was wondering, on the other hand, if one of you at least could save himself."

"To what purpose?"

"That's true: if it hits me it will hit both of you also."

Niccolo was becoming restive under the monotonous strain of such disconsolate grief. He began fidgeting on his chair with increasing unrest, just as he used to do in the summer when he would strike and smite the air all around him with his hands in order to catch a troublesome fly.

Giulio noticed his uneasiness.

"Go for a nice long walk," he advised. "It's not necessary for you to stay indoors here just because I stay." He felt, however, that if he had to bear his pain alone it would increase a hundredfold.

Niccolo replied:

"I'll guarantee that I'll never lose my appetite. If we had half-a-dozen roast woodcock for dinner this evening I'd eat even the bones, for the satisfaction of feeling they would never be given to anyone else on this earth. As to the shop, I'd be the first to set fire to it. Why *will* you worry about it, Giulio?"

"Is there any need for you to give me courage? I've never felt so much of a man as I do now. It seems to me I have nothing more to

## *Three Crosses*

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ask of anyone, neither man nor God. All my strength of will is now concentrated in realising the extent of my downfall. It's a kind of inverted pride, but it's pride nevertheless. I've done all in my power to—not to become wealthy, because that would have been impossible—but to keep what had been handed over to us by our father. If I haven't succeeded it has been through no fault of mine. Still, I'll take the blame all the same; and I shall die with a better conscience than I had two or three years ago. It was written that I should end badly, and I don't complain. Someone might say that they were wrong in esteeming me, and I shall reply that I can do now without any esteem. I'd be the first person to dispel his illusions. No one can say of me at least that I am not as God made me and put me on this earth. I have never, voluntarily, hurt anyone. I have forged signatures simply because my own would have counted for nothing."

Niccolo grunted his approval, emphasising it with an oath. Giulio, however, felt as if he were dying, and his one wish was to offer himself in sacrifice without heeding or asking for any indulgence.

"No one who knew that I had committed forgery would shake hands with me. But I don't mind that now."

Even his breath failed him, and he was obliged to stop. Niccolo was sympathetic :

"I'm the only one who can appreciate you, because I've heard you speak in this way and I'm your brother. But you mustn't take any notice of me either. *I* am going to follow *you*, unless you just want me to disappear in silence. We must be quiet now; here comes the bounder."

Enrico entered, more than usually glum and sulky.

"What do you want?" Giulio asked him, without the slightest trace of anger or rancour in his tone.

Enrico mumbled at first, without directly replying. "To-morrow is Sunday," he finally blurted out, "shall we have a feast of roast thrushes? I saw some at Ciccia's, and they looked fat enough."

"I'm not dining with you to-morrow," Niccolo answered.

"Why not? Where are you going?"

"To Florence," he replied insolently. "It's such a long time since I tasted roasted beans, and only the Florentines can really do them. They're no good in Siena."

"You'll eat your beans in Florence to-morrow, and you will buy your thrushes from Ciccia." Giulio answered them both in a placid voice. "Is there anything else you would like?"

## X

ON Sunday Giulio and the Cavaliere Nicchioli took another walk. Niccolo had gone to Florence, and, that no attempt should be made to dissuade him from going, he had tried not to speak to his brothers more than could be helped.

When he came to these sudden decisions he became quite impossible, and usually refused to discuss the matter at all or to justify the step in any way. He would just vanish and no one could find him. So it was on this occasion.

"Shall we walk from Ovile to Pispino?" the Cavaliere asked Giulio.

The latter was absent-minded.

"Wherever you wish. It's all the same to me," he replied.

The air was laden with a pungent sweetness, and the country round almost gave the impression of latent spring. Most of the peasants had gathered their grapes, and for this reason all the vineyard gates by the roadside were open; they still bore, however, their protective thorny bundles of twigs.

x Siena is composed of several straight lines of roofs and façades of uniform height, which suddenly lose their regularity where the houses run out a little way on the hill-side. San

Francesco and Provenzano, with their groups of houses in the centre, would almost cut those parallel lines at right angles if, at that point, the descent were not so steep. The boundary walls, with their retaining turrets, all weather-beaten and empty, leave a great bare space and reach right down to the road, looking like a loosely coiled rope lying round the town. Farther on the road winds beside the boundary and Siena is no longer visible. After a while it comes in sight again, with all its houses massed together and protected. The Torre del Mangia seems to hang, high against the sky, from its walls.

"Turn round and see how beautiful our Siena looks," the Cavaliere said.

But Giulio was disinclined to obey. While waiting for Nicchioli to call at the appointed time he had persuaded himself that to ask the Cavaliere for another signature would have compromised him, or, at least, would have given ground for too strong a suspicion. Besides, in the presence of Nicchioli he felt weak and shy. The thought of having deceived him filled him with a longing to compensate the Cavaliere with a deep and intimate devotion. All these thoughts had come to him while he waited for his friend's arrival. Now, however, that he was actually with him he felt inclined to change his mind and was tempted to take the plunge; it seemed to him so impossible that a further



signature should be refused. Then, again, he was struck by the uselessness of it all. It would only mean safety for another few weeks, and then—— But when the Cavaliere continued to speak to him with his somewhat futile but intimate affection, he came to a sudden decision.

“I should like to beg another favour from you to-morrow, such as you have been kind enough to grant me once before.”

“If it's anything I can do, very willingly.”

Giulio's blood gave a sudden great surge, and he plunged at once into the actual request, without even pausing for breath, as though it would have been fatal to hesitate :

“We need some more money.”

The Cavaliere paled visibly.

“How much?” he asked.

“Ten thousand lire.”

“And why?”

“We've absolutely run dry.”

The Cavaliere was astonished, and Giulio realised that he had been rash and had dealt the death-blow to his hopes. The pause that followed appeared interminable; it seemed to him, after a while, as if his last remark had been uttered countless ages ago, and as if it were now possible, after all this time, to remedy the false move. He was on the point of assuring his companion that there had been no truth in his statement when he became aware of a sudden change in the Cavaliere's attitude

to him. Then he pleaded like a child, seeking to convey the impression that the whole thing was a mere caprice, a not altogether indispensable necessity, amounting practically to a luxury. He was anxious that Nicchioli should not suspect, and with an effort he smiled. But the Cavaliere, in an altogether different humour, took no notice of the smile. What could he be thinking of? He kept his gaze on the ground, and gave no answer, did not utter a word at all.

This sudden change of temper on the part of Nicchioli seemed to point to serious and evil consequences. He was quickening his pace as if he could no longer bear to remain by Giulio's side. Was he angry? Was their friendship to end? Or was he going to inquire at the bank?

But Giulio could guess nothing definite, even though the Cavaliere on leaving him shook hands with him almost reproachfully.

On returning home he found Enrico engaged in teaching his nieces to play draughts, while reclining in an arm-chair with one foot in a hot mustard bath, because of a sudden attack of gout which had surprised him during the night. Modesta, seated by the window, was sewing.

He went straight to his room and closed the door behind him. He felt that the act of living was for him a totally involuntary one. Nothing mattered to him now, and the voices of the others speaking in the next room seemed as though checked by some barrier, which pre-

vented them from reaching him or including him in their circle. So obsessed was he by this idea that, at a certain point, he looked around him searchingly, half expecting to find the obstacle materialised and meeting his gaze. He could not even be sad and preoccupied ; an unchanging and fatal clarity in a medley of recollections and thoughts reminded him that he could have done nothing to alter the state of affairs. He felt that all around him everything was crumbling and he could find not one solid basis on which to take a decision. He even felt that it would be always impossible for him to give a reason for this conscious silence and emptiness that overwhelmed him. He needed to turn his mind to happy thoughts ; it seemed to him quite natural to do so. He was pleased to think that Niccolo had gone to Florence to enjoy himself ; and presently he himself found it impossible to believe that on the very next day a bill would fall due. It seemed to him now quite easy to detach himself from the reality of things ; he even felt that it would be unnecessary to approach them again and there would be no difficulty in keeping away from them.

He became aware that the voices were silent ; the talking had ceased, and after what seemed like a very long time Enrico came to the door, opened it and looked in.

"Have you been out with the Cavaliere?" he asked.

"Yes; for nearly two hours. Why do you ask?"

"I just wanted to know what you think of it all, and whether you said anything to him. Don't you trust him; he's as many-coated as an onion."

"Do you think it likely that I should want to get into trouble? He was occupied with entirely different thoughts; it wouldn't even have been polite of me to talk of my affairs."

"Then you did quite right not to."

"I wasn't born yesterday."

"No; but I only asked so that I should know how to act in case I met him."

"Whatever he should ask you, you must always look as if you knew absolutely nothing about it at all."

"Quite so. I agree. Why do you stay here all alone? Come into the other room with me. Modesta and the girls are going out."

"Why should I move from here? I'm quite comfortable," Giulio answered, as though he almost suspected his brother of wishing him to take some false step.

"Just as you please, of course," said Enrico, and he withdrew, closing the door again.


Instantly Giulio was overcome with a feeling of violent delirium. Who could stop him if he should choose to fling himself at his sister-in-law and his nieces and shout out the whole truth? Why should he refrain from dashing his brains

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out against the wall? Who could prevent him from running wildly through the streets of Siena from one end of the city to the other? Must he then commit some extravagant act which would astonish his friends? "See," he thought, "how a man can alter from one moment to another. It's like a sudden illness, which overcomes one when it is least expected." Through all these feverish mental processes he remained seated, outwardly calm, and no one, looking at him, would have suspected anything unusual. He was annoyed when presently his nieces entered to announce their intention of going out with their aunt and to kiss him good-bye. "Is there any need for all this affection?" he thought, and failed to realise that things were only as usual. "We must alter our views of life according to our understanding," he mused. "Otherwise it seems to me that in the forty years of my life I have not even succeeded in building up anything which could give me real pleasure or which corresponds in the least to my ideals. Why do the others believe me equal to themselves? Because I've led them to do so. And why, if I told them what I really think, would they be displeased and refuse to listen? Because I have so misled them and so misled myself that I have now lost all right to undeceive them and myself. Was I right or wrong? And wouldn't it perhaps be better for them too if I succeeded in really





letting them know my thoughts? I've continued to live by always adapting myself to circumstances, and by enforcing upon myself a certain regularity which seemed to me quite right and opportune. Now I see that I may have been living only provisionally, until one day some decisive fact should come along—like this of the bill—which would give an appearance of weakness to all that had previously seemed to me to be strong and well chosen. If I chose no longer to obey all which is even now almost a part of myself, I should be obliged to leave this house and all it holds, and go who knows where! My deliberative state of mind depends only on myself; as long as I keep it to myself and disclose it to no other human being. But if I wish to obey my own will I must necessarily, one way or another, let the others know of it, and then I should no longer be as free as I now think I am; therefore, in reality I have merely deluded myself with a sense of joy or sorrow through the effect of my own conscience. The very fear I have of making a mistake through taking a decision, which prevents me making up my mind, is the cause of my indifference. It really isn't worth while, then, for me to suffer; because, plainly, I am suffering not only for myself, but also for the others. I live in this state of mind because they are living with me."

It seemed almost possible for him to relegate



some of his own pain to one of the others, and to retire to some place apart, whence he would assist, a mere spectator. He failed to find any reason why he should continue to live, and the wish to die seemed to him quite natural and inevitable. "They are making me die, without my even having a right to refuse. Indeed, I am not even thinking of refusing. Why?" But he could find no answer; and gradually his thoughts wandered to other subjects concerning more or less indirectly the question itself and its relation to his whole past life. He thought of his youth, and remembered that in those times at least he had never by any chance lost himself in the negative possibilities which now filtered through even his remotest past, the past that had seemed so invulnerable. No, there did not exist such a thing as resistance; and one day's despair sufficed to bring him into abrupt contact with his youth, which with startling swiftness had turned into testimony of his present feelings.

He emerged from his room with a look on his face which caused Enrico to inquire whether he felt ill.

"Ill? Why? I've never felt so well as I do to-day."

Meanwhile Niccolo was passing the time in Florence by wandering about all day without speaking to anyone. He was trying energetically to put away all troublesome thoughts,



★ and he walked erect, with his shoulders squared and his head held high, like a man of position occupied in paying the important calls inevitable to his wealth and rank. The day seemed much too short to him, and only when he found himself once again in the train, approaching Siena, did the doubt cross his mind whether it would not have been wiser and kinder to have stayed with Giulio. His doubts were soon set at rest, however, by a hundred and one pretexts of self-justification, and of approval for his attitude. Each argument was better and more convincing than the last and he set his mind at ease. "It would be very foolish if I worried about it all before I need. I did quite right in distracting myself for to-day, anyway."

When the train arrived at Siena it was nearly dark, and Niccolo felt in no hurry to return home. He allowed all the other passengers, with their porters and luggage, to pass in front of him, and he gazed at Siena as if he were seeing it for the first time. He even felt tempted to ask a passer-by which road he should take. He stopped, with his hands behind his back, to look up at the basilica of San Francesco all darkly massed in the deepening shadow.

Opposite, less than half-a-kilometre away, the slope of a hill still showed light against the twilight all round ; and between it and the

basilica the valley, which farther on stretches out into a road and runs right on to the distant mountains across the plain, was sinking into a placid and bluish haze, streaked here and there with grey, whitish mist. A cypress, standing on an invisible hill, and black against the faintly luminous sky, seemed to be suspended in space over the plain. Under San Francesco were the houses of Oville, all huddled and tumbled together.

Niccolo turned round to see if anyone were noticing him. He would have liked people to think him proud, haughty and free from care ; and on his way home he stopped at every shop window in which table delicacies and eatables were displayed.

"I've enjoyed myself immensely," he announced to the others on arriving home. "I've had a splendid day."

Then he added, with simulated magnanimity and regret: "I'll bet you've all been very bored."

## XI

NICCHIOLI had suspected nothing ; it had only seemed to him that the bookseller was brazenly taking advantage of him, and this had annoyed him. On second thoughts, however, he perceived that he could have been just as firm in the matter without showing his annoyance so plainly. He therefore decided that he would explain things to Giulio, and probably later on, after looking carefully into the question and assuring himself of the absence of any danger, would be disposed to grant the request, or as much of it as possible. Indeed, he could not forgive himself for having refused so flatly and curtly. It was so humiliating too. His ample good-nature and placid conceit prevented him from fearing any complications on Giulio's part. Nevertheless, it would not do to be too eager in apologising, or to fail in displaying a proper sense of condescension. It would be better, therefore, not to return to the bookshop for some little time. In fact, on Monday he left for his Monteriggioni estates, although there was no necessity for him to be there. If the Gambi brothers should seek him, at least he would not be at home, and they would be left to wonder what his attitude was. One has to be good, but there is a limit—so thought the Cavaliere.

On the Monday morning all three brothers turned up at the shop. Enrico grumbled; he felt humiliated and, consequently, sullen; his eyes were swollen and bloodshot. He took his watch out of his pocket and looked at it.

"Oh, only two more hours left in which to meet the bill," he announced.

Niccolo, who was lounging despondently in his chair, turned to him with a derisive and angry laugh.

"You be quiet!" he shouted.

Giulio begged them not to start a squabble or he would take leave of his senses altogether. He was as usual meek and gentle of manner, and he was absorbed in trying to find a prudent way out of the difficulty. He was holding his chin with one of his hands and his look was bent on the ground. His hands had become thin and almost transparent; they appeared to be composed only of tendons. Niccolo kept his gaze fixed on him, hoping that he would look up and receive the smile which was being prepared for him. But Giulio with gentle resignation remarked:

"I'll forge another signature."

The two brothers expected something better of him, and remained silent, almost annoyed. Giulio felt that they were right and said no more.

Enrico assumed a sudden jocularly which he believed would be approved of by Niccolo.

"Have you no better saint to turn to?" he asked.

"Wasn't that what we did on the other occasions?" Giulio queried in turn.

"Maybe . . . and I think it's about time we left off too."

Niccolo rose and went to the writing-desk.

"Give me the money to buy the bill," he said, addressing Giulio. "I'll go and get it."

"Wait," suggested Enrico. "Let's think things over first."

Giulio, at this, replaced the money in the till, pressing the tips of his fingers on it. Niccolo paused; he looked calm and almost pleased, as if he were longing to go out and buy the bill. He liked to appear the most wide-awake of the three and the wisest. He remained quiet for a moment, then, looking at his brothers, and seeing the indecision depicted on their faces, he threw himself violently into his chair with a gesture of impatience. After another contemptuous glance around him he pressed his feet on to the ground, tilted back his chair as far as it would go, and felt fruitlessly in his pockets for a cigar.

Giulio was looking down, although he had turned towards Enrico. He felt his eyelids closing over his eyes involuntarily.

"Couldn't that rascal Nicchioli help us out of this mess?" demanded Enrico.

Giulio shook his head.



"You ought to try, at least."

Giulio flushed a deep red.

"I spoke to him about it yesterday," he confessed.

Niccolo, on hearing this, moved on his chair so heavily and suddenly that it creaked as if it might break.

"I won't have you telling me lies!" he shouted.

"What harm have I done?" Giulio queried.

Niccolo was regaining his energy and daring. He walked to the door and back again, then again backwards and forwards two or three times.

"Stop it! Can't you see what a draught you're making?" grumbled Enrico.

Niccolo without more ado flung himself once more into his chair.

"I won't budge from here," he shouted.

Just as Giulio was about to tell Enrico that he might go to buy the bill, provided he did not take too long over it, Corsali entered. He felt in a mood for gossip, and had a specially good story to tell about some of his tenants—one of those stories that invariably set the brothers in a good humour. However, Niccolo attacked him at once.

"What d'you want? This isn't the right day to call at all," he burst out.

"What's the matter with you? How should I know?"

"Go!"

"Well, you might have better manners."

Niccolo snarled, and stamped his feet on the ground.

Giulio hastened to make signs to Corsali, with an expressive look, that they could not attend to him.

"If I can be of any use to you——" Corsali began rather tentatively.

Enrico turned to his brothers. "He won't go," he said, as if to them. "He dashes in here boldly, and then expects to be treated like an educated person. It's your fault, both of you, because he always calls on *you*. I wouldn't have asked him in, not even once."

Corsali, in a temper, broke in :

"What's wrong with you that you should bark at me? As long as I was useful to you——"

"No one is of any use to me," Niccolo replied. "Except rich men. And to-day not even those. Go, and that's all."

"I'm surprised at Giulio."

But even Giulio was impatient; and Corsali left them angrily.

The three of them were beside themselves with rage, and this was one of the rare moments in which they truly felt affection for each other. Giulio, with the certainty that neither of them would contradict him, turned to Enrico :

"Go and fetch it," he said.

Left to themselves, Giulio and Niccolo felt a tenderness for each other which seemed at one with their rage. Even Giulio now became

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more alert, and when the bill arrived he took it and flattened it out on the desk. He chose a pen that would write well, and tested it on his thumb-nail; but, as his hands trembled a little, he remarked: "The first thing to do is to calm myself."

His two brothers stood beside him, leaning against the book-shelves. Giulio lighted a cigarette and after smoking half of it said: "Now I am ready."

He pressed his hands together, then pressed each finger of the right hand in turn, dipped the pen, looked to see that there was not too much ink in it, and holding the bill firmly with his left hand began the signature. Instantly he became enthusiastic, and even though he felt perturbed and as if his consciousness were for the moment suspended, nothing would have stopped him from finishing the signature, protected and almost excused as he felt by the certainty of his skill. He examined the result from all sides; he showed it to his brothers, who on comparing it with a genuine one of Nicchioli's pronounced it perfect. However, once the signature was affixed, it must be taken to the bank, and here hesitancy supervened. To bring himself to the point of doing so he usually employed the same argument: "Now it's done, and it would be absurd of me to regret it or to be ashamed. It's done, and I must take it to the bank. What would be the

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use of it otherwise? I'm no longer a child, to be at a loss how to behave." But on this particular morning he was not allowed time for these reflections, or even for shorter ones; for both Enrico and Niccolo intimated to him:

"We mustn't lose any more time. There's only half-an-hour left. Get up and go!"

He took the bill and obeyed without a word. Nevertheless when out in the road he felt he was losing that sense of security which usually upheld him, and his steps became slower and slower. Couldn't he turn back and tear the bill to pieces? He thought of it, but only for an instant, and even then as if it were utterly impossible. Several tempting streets stretched out before him, but he must take the only one leading to the bank. When he found himself on the steps of the building, so clean and smart, he recognised the peculiar odour which always wafted out to him from these offices. Several people were going up and down the steps; he knew most of them, and hastened to greet them. When he reached the counter where the bill had to be presented he found he must wait as there were at least a dozen persons already there. Nevertheless the thought of going did not even cross his mind; on the contrary, he ostentatiously displayed much hurry, and finally handed the bill over to the clerk, with a conventional smile—the smile of a well-

known and esteemed man of business. Then, jokingly, he inquired: "Is it all right?"

The clerk nodded his head.

"Quite in order," he replied, throwing the bill into a wicker basket which already contained several other documents.

Giulio turned to leave the building and descended the outer steps almost buoyantly. He felt lighter of heart.

"This time again it is all right," he thought, and he felt excited, though it was a troubled and insecure excitement. He knew that his elation was fictitious and without strength; rather like the sensations of a convalescent who, as he regains his faculties, recognises them as formerly, but finds them now jaded and worn out. He wants them to be fresh and intense. So Giulio, slowly but surely, felt his light-heartedness disappearing, and, in its stead, the old apprehension and oppression returned. Then, suddenly, he was again overwhelmed by all the weight of his complicated troubles, and he realised with a pang that he was again struggling in their very midst.


In the shop he found Nisard talking to his brothers in that tone of voice peculiar to one who finds himself among the bereaved. The Frenchman knew that all was not as it should be with the Gambi brothers, even though he was far from guessing the actual nature of the trouble. He felt that some show of sympathy was

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demanded, and in order that the correct, precise and almost conventional form of humour which was natural to his character should not hurt their feelings, he repressed it and assumed a tone of condolence.

Giulio assured his brothers with a look that the bill had been taken ; then, in silence, he sat down at his desk, adding to his feeling of awkwardness and constraint a curiosity as to the nature of the conversation that his entrance had interrupted. For want of something better to do, he started to blow away the dust which lay on his desk, bending his head down so low that his cheek almost touched it, and looking sideways against the light at the minute massed particles which covered everything. Very carefully and fastidiously he blew them away, as though his whole mind were concentrated on the task.



He rather liked Nisard, who would discuss ancient paintings with him and display all his erudition as a bibliophile, always imbuing his remarks with acute and good-natured irony. He also possessed several rare books, and when showing them to his friends he would turn over the pages complacently and fondly, as though he were caressing them. He was, amongst other things, a connoisseur of old prints, and could recognise and date them immediately, gloating over them with that rather foolish smile of his.



On this particular afternoon Nisard perceived at a glance that even Giulio was different from usual; and that the brothers should feel and admire his amiability, he carefully chose his words, giving voice, before leaving, to a few rather pompous and well-turned phrases, natural to him in certain circumstances.

"We shall know by to-morrow whether the bill has been passed by the bank," Giulio remarked as soon as Nisard had left the shop.

"I'm positive it has," Niccolo replied.

Enrico, however, was not of the same opinion. He shook his head.

"If I were certain that they would reject it, I'd go and kill them all, one by one. Thieves! What would it matter to them if they *did* do us this favour? I'd like to see *them* in this same fix, and see what they'd do!" He spat this out heatedly and rather incoherently.

Niccolo argued with him at length to try and convince him that he was wrong.

"Bah!" he finally exclaimed impatiently. "You never by any chance guess things right. As a matter of fact, I am sure—just because you say no—that the bill will be accepted. And everything will go splendidly. I can almost see the bill as the people take it in hand and decide about it. It will sail right ahead full tilt. *Perdio!* We are gentlemen for the present."

Even Giulio, under the influence of such

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violent optimism, felt comforted ; he even felt so unusually and excitably relieved as to say foolish things.

"I will think of it all day," he announced, "so that the bill will almost become alive and as if I were in its place ; it will be able to speak for itself."

"Then why on earth were we all so glum a little while ago if all is such plain sailing?" queried Enrico. "If Corsali should call while I am not in, please tell him on my part that I did not intend any offence. I was not serious."

"Where are you going, then?" asked Giulio.

"I'm going over to have a game or two of cards ; I can't help it. I shouldn't feel myself if I didn't."

Niccolo was so nervously merry that he began to hum and sing dubious little songs. Giulio was listening ; but at a certain point, and without daring to say a word to Niccolo, he felt a sharp shock, swift and burning, almost as though a sword with one blow had cleft him from head to foot, remorselessly and surely. In an impulse of self-defence he hid his face in his hands and remained standing so while Niccolo sang.

## XII

AT the bank a friend of Nicchioli's had been so surprised to see the bill, and to think that Nicchioli should have accepted another for the Gambis, that he thought it wise to mention it to him.

The Cavaliere at first found it impossible to believe it, and then, when convinced of the truth, was so overwhelmed and despondent about the consequences that not even his wife could succeed in her efforts to calm him. In his exaggerated view of it all regard for the world at large disappeared, and had he found himself suddenly bereft of all his wealth and possessions the news just imparted to him could not have plunged him in deeper gloom. His wife repeatedly pointed out to him that, after all, a loss of sixty or seventy thousand lire, even supposing that they could recover nothing from the shop, only meant the loss of less than a year's income. He admitted that she was right time after time ; he kissed her hands while she caressed him comfortingly, but after a moment fell again into a deeper and blacker depression than ever. He could not make up his mind whether to call on the Gambi brothers that same evening or whether to wait until the next day, when, no doubt, he would feel better able

to cope with the matter. His wife advised him not to go out that day and managed to keep him indoors. During the night he lay awake, inconsolable; only towards morning, after a final hour of soundless weeping, did he doze off, exhausted, and eventually find relief in deep sleep.

On awaking he arose with the firm intention of going directly to the bookshop, there to give vent to all the just indignation and contempt which he felt for the brothers. He must not only be rude to them; he must be downright and crushingly abusive. On the way thither, however, his fury gradually diminished, and he felt weak and perspiring. Finally, he lacked the courage to enter the library alone, and hurried off to Corsali's home to beg his support and company. Corsali was almost stunned at the news and felt that it must somehow be unreal, untrue; a bad dream, a nightmare rather, anything but the truth!

In the meanwhile the brothers knew that the bill had been not only rejected, but denounced. It seemed, indeed, as if all Siena knew of it. Several groups were heard commenting loudly on the matter, and various busybodies stopped in front of the bookshop to stare in stolidly or pryingly. Some said it was an affair of almost ninety thousand lire; others were assured that the sum reached a hundred thousand.

Enrico had gone to his usual tavern to arrange

for a game of cards for that same evening, and an acquaintance of his had laughed in his face. He was taken aback, and immediately ran back to tell his brothers of it, pointing out to them how strangely the passers-by were stopping outside the shop to look in. There was nothing to hope for.

Giulio fainted, and Niccolo, holding his head in his hands, distractedly kissed him and called him affectionately by his name, not knowing what to do to restore him. Enrico, for fear of finding himself mixed up in some humiliating scene, hastened home and stayed there in security; then, anxious to be the first bringer of the news, he blurted out everything to Modesta. The latter broke hysterically into loud sobs and lamentations, in which she was immediately joined by her nieces.

When Giulio regained consciousness his eyes, although dry, were as the eyes of one who had shed many tears. Niccolo could not remain still for an instant; he wandered into every corner of the shop, quivering with rage, swearing and insulting everybody and anybody who came into his mind. His voice was hoarse and gruff, but there still persisted at intervals that peculiar laugh of his, which rendered his tone rather cutting and rasping.

When the Cavaliere Nicchioli appeared followed by Corsali, who would have much preferred not to be present, for fear of the ill-feeling

which the brothers might afterwards feel towards him, Niccolo stopped suddenly as if stunned, and paled almost incredibly. Giulio fainted a second time. Nicchioli turned to Niccolo.

"I have the right to tell you just what I think of you, but I am too sorry for you," he said, even though he was not at all sure whether Niccolo was listening to him or not.

Niccolo made a deprecating gesture, as though he wished the Cavaliere to wait awhile, and at the same time indicating Giulio unconscious on his desk; but Nicchioli would not stop.

"There is no need for explanations. I expected better things of you," he replied, and turned to go.

Corsali, who was standing at the entrance of the shop, opened the door for him, and before following him out addressed Niccolo.

"I'll return later," he said, and left the shop.

Niccolo suddenly felt a desire to laugh; but then, looking at Giulio and seeing him lying as though lifeless, he was furious. He lifted his brother's head and shoulders from the desk and settled him more comfortably in his chair. "Modesta ought to be here," he thought, "*I* can't help him."

Giulio after a while opened his eyes and looked around him.

"What has happened?" he asked. "I suddenly



felt giddy. See if my eyeglasses are not broken."

Niccolo handed them to him.

"You must be stronger," he said gently.

Giulio attempted a smile.

"Did Nicchioli go away directly?" he inquired.

"Almost at once," Niccolo informed him.

"What did he say to you? I wanted to speak to him myself."

"He didn't say anything. If he were not such a fool he'd pay that bill, and then he too would avoid the consequences if we failed." ?

"I think I feel ill," Giulio said.

At this moment Niccolo observed a few people standing outside the shop. He planted himself behind the glass door and laughed at them, and they, surprised and ashamed at being caught in their morbid curiosity, walked rapidly away.

"Do they think I'll give in to them? It would need something much worse than a failure to make me do that. Niccolo would bow to no one. Listen, Giulio, don't upset yourself like this. I can't stand it. Look at *my* behaviour. Look, my hands are not even shaking." ★

He stretched out his arm, but his hand was trembling so visibly that he immediately withdrew it.

"What a set of people! Anyone would think that we'd taken the money from *them*."

What is it to do with them? If one only knew, they're probably all worse than we are."

He began to feel that perhaps his pluck was influencing his brother's thoughts, so he continued in the same strain: "As for me, I am perfectly satisfied if I am left with only this wooden chest. I'll have it placed in my own room, and I can look at it as long as I like."

But Giulio continued to look despondent, and he would have been thankful for silence. He felt, despite all the pain, a great gentleness, and almost a great happiness, which gave him the desire for a greater and more fervid sufferance. It seemed to him that he had become insensible to sorrow, and this feeling beguiled him. Why couldn't he suffer as he had made up his mind to do? Then why did he go on living? Was it not incompatible that he should live if his eyes still saw the same book-shelves and his brother? Was it not immoral that he should in a few moments be speaking as usual to Modesta and to his nieces? Why then, and to what end had he always been so different from Enrico and Niccolo? He stood revealed to himself in his true colours; no one could have told him the truth half so emphatically and boldly as he now did himself. That was why the anguish of other days did not return. That was why he now felt this nebulous and indefinable peace of mind, this almost gentle ease which pervaded his whole being. It was as if

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his thoughts were being purified by contact with a divine pity.

"I envy all those who have faith," he said to Niccolo.

"In what?" asked the latter with disdain.

"In God."

Niccolo became impatient.

"Giulio, you have lost your head completely to-day. I didn't think you'd be so weak. Let me feel your pulse. You must be feverish."

"I just said . . . anything. . . . Rather foolish," Giulio admitted. "We had better go home, I think. We shan't be able to hide things any longer, anyhow."

"Oh, of course. It's only right that Modesta should know how to bear up under misfortune. She must get used to it directly. I'll see to that. Woe to her if she weeps. I wouldn't stay with her at all then. Perdio! She'll just have to shut up—or I'll make her do so by force. Have you any wine at home?"

But even Niccolo, despite his attitude of bravado, and despite his instinctive scorn of all weak sentiments, was exasperated, and felt that his heart misgave him. He hated the thought of his probable ultimate surrender to circumstances, and he feared repentance. Nevertheless for the present he seemed equal to any amount of resistance, and to any extravagance of action. In fact, as he stood by the glass door, with his

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hands behind his back and his lighted cigar in his mouth, looking fixedly at the passers-by and not flinching in his gaze until he had abashed their curiosity, he seemed indomitable.


"Giulio, come and show yourself too," he said suddenly in a tone of assumed joviality. "Why on earth do you give any importance to such trifles? Come on, and leave the people alone."

Giulio replied: "Let us close the shop instead and go home. Then, in time, we'll hear what is going to happen to us. I suppose they'll come and seal the doors here, and then——"

"And then?"

"If I'm still alive, I shall see."

"The same with me."

 They left the shop together, as they had not done for years, and they felt awkwardly conscious of the fact; their steps refused to harmonise. Giulio affected indifference to recent events, and Niccolo stared at passers-by with unmistakable arrogance. At a certain point in the Via del Re Giulio remarked:

"How horrible these stables smell. One really ought never to come this way."

They descended the Vicolo di San Vigilio and came to the Palazzo Piccolomini. One of its angles seemed very close to the Torre; so close that it appeared only to be separated from it by a clean, clear cut. The Palazzo itself, built of stone, with its iron-barred

windows, had a stern and forbidding aspect, a little softened, however, by the appearance of the Loggie all deserted and dusty, and closed in by their old railings.

Niccolo raised his eyes—gleaming afresh with malice and slyness—to the windows of the Palazzo.

“If only I had a chance of getting in to where the documents are kept,” he sighed. “No such thing as a bill then.”

When they reached home, however, his light mood suddenly departed, and his face assumed an expression of imminent storm. Giulio, before opening the door, begged to be allowed to act alone, without any attempt at scenes, even supposing that Modesta should wish to have her say in the matter. After all, it was only right that she should be allowed to discuss the whole affair, was it not? Slightly reassured by Niccolo’s silence, Giulio opened the door and entered.

Then, as if she had been standing there waiting for them, Modesta suddenly sprang forward and, throwing her arms round her husband’s neck, remained there, crying and sobbing hysterically, almost overthrowing Niccolo with her weight. Niccolo, who cared little for this wild display of feeling, and who was wiping from his cheeks the tears which his wife was shedding upon them, turned to Giulio helplessly :

“Take her away from me! You take her

away! I'd hurt her if I tried to do so myself, she's hugging me so tightly."

But at this point the two nieces clasped Giulio, and their combined attack overpowered him. But he was moved by it, and would have liked them never to leave him again. Nevertheless, he begged them to coax their aunt into the sitting-room, which entreaty they obediently complied with, and finally succeeded in carrying out. Giulio was surprised to see that they knew everything already; he had not expected it, and the thought that Enrico might have been the one to impart the news never even crossed his mind.

"See what extraordinary feeling that woman has," Niccolo said. "She didn't even utter one word of complaint or blame."

"You go to her now."

Niccolo went to the sitting-room and sat down beside his wife, where he looked somewhat ridiculous, so helpless was he, and so awkwardly and unwillingly did he stay there. He found nothing to say, and when she, in her affection for him, looked into his eyes, he turned his gaze elsewhere, and affected to do so in order to distract his thoughts as much as possible.

"Why couldn't you tell me the truth before?" Modesta asked. "You see how rightly I guessed. Didn't I at least deserve sincerity from you?"



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Niccolo made an awkward gesture and closed his eyes.

"Perhaps I might even have given you good advice," Modesta continued.

Niccolo shook himself and started to rise from his chair, then dropped into it again and still remained silent.


"Certainly I wouldn't have allowed you to spend so much."

At this Niccolo resolutely arose, and saying to her with almost mocking authority in his voice, "We'll talk about it to-morrow," he left her.

Giulio meanwhile had retired to his room, where he felt much more depressed than he had done in the bookshop. It would have been impossible for him to remain there long. He ate a piece of bread dipped in wine and then hurried back to the bookshop, where he shut himself in. He had several things to go through, and many papers to tear up or destroy, and then he must prepare his ledgers and square his accounts. He worked quickly and easily, with a clearness that he had not always possessed. He worked as though by so doing he could have remedied things; and he felt calm, albeit with a calmness that weighed like lead and that rather frightened him. He divined that it might lead him to incredible sadness.

That evening at dinner he ate nothing, and,

feeling weak and unsteady, he went directly to bed. He slept with an ease and a gentleness which fascinated him. When he awoke, he regretted that he could not have gone on sleeping quietly and serenely for ever.



Niccolo attempted to speak to Enrico, but found that it was impossible. One said one thing, and the other said another, and neither was disposed even to try and comprehend the other's remarks. Enrico seemed almost imbecile, and appeared quite unconscious of the bill and its consequences. He seemed to admit the truth of it only after great effort and with great difficulty, and in the end stated that they would gain nothing by talking about it anyhow, so what was the good of doing so? He had not even opened the book-binding shop that morning, and his two or three employees, on being told the reason for this inaction, had departed. Niccolo would have liked to remain with Giulio, but, as the latter remonstrated, he had gone off to try and meet Nisard, in which he had been unsuccessful.

He could not remain quiet, and he felt that he must talk, so he returned home and played about with his nieces, while Modesta, reclining in an easy-chair, put her fingers to her ears to shut out the noise.

Enrico, who was leaning with his elbows on the window-sill, every now and then turned round to view the interior of the room, and then

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looked away again without a word to gaze outside with a yawn.

"The worst of it is that we shan't be able to feed so well as we have been doing until now," he remarked as he sat down at the table.

"After all, the rest doesn't matter."

### XIII

X IN the morning Giulio said to himself: "No, I won't allow myself any illusions. I understand now that I must look at things from a different point of view, one that I have not yet considered. If I consented to go on living it would be as bad as consent to a long, continuous martyrdom. It would be like taking pleasure in being martyred. But that must not be, even though I should suffer much less. It can't be that I should have less courage to do to myself what I wouldn't do to others. Perhaps I'm mistaken, but I think it is necessary that I should face death. During the night I seemed to think and feel already that I had done with my present life, and I was not sorry. I never dreamt so pleasantly."

But the calm of the preceding night even now stood revealed in its truer garb of morbid thought. "Some will think that I'll put an end to my life by throwing myself out of the window," he continued to himself with a feeling of pleasure, "and others will think that I'll drown myself. No, that's not how I'll die."

He left the house. The morning was sweet and refreshingly damp. He stopped to look at a crippled woman, who, with the help of a stick, and by leaning heavily on the stone

balustrade, was trying to toil up the steps of the church of San Martino. He had never before witnessed such obstinate eagerness, and, at the same time, such impatient anxiety so filled with joy. He felt that this miserable little woman might signify one thing for which he searched in vain. His desperation increased. The very next day the law would see to it that the doors of his bookshop were sealed; and he had before him only a few hours in which to come to some decisive and definite resolution.

On turning a corner he saw Nisard, who came towards him immediately, his face assuming quickly a look of compassion.

"What a misfortune. I am so sorry," he said.

Giulio looked at him haggardly, his whole appearance so expressive of the thoughts that now filled his mind as to be hardly recognisable as the Giulio of old.

"It was inevitable," he replied. "Will you accompany me a short way? I was going towards the shop, and if you don't mind being seen walking with me, we might go a little way together."

Nisard had no hesitation, and without a word he turned and walked with Giulio. As if by mutual consent, they both turned into the Via delle Terme, where they would be less likely to meet acquaintances.

The tall, thin houses of the Via oppress one

with a sense of monotonous narrowness. The straight little alleys of Fontebranda are like so many crevices, through which, in the distance, can be caught glimpses of a green, fresh hill, partitioned at intervals with rows of black cypresses. In the Piazza San Domenico Giulio and Nisard halted, secure in the feeling that here they were out of earshot and out of sight of the curious. It had a small garden, half overgrown, with a fir-tree in its centre, on which half-a-dozen urchins were climbing and romping. The church in the Piazza is of a uniform red ; its windows are blocked up with red bricks, and its tower is plastered from turret to base. Two jutting walls beside the tower enclose an intervening space, and under an archway which reaches to the roof of the tower there is a strip of green, which widens out and joins on to the grass of the garden.

It seemed to Giulio as if with one breath he inhaled all the atmosphere of the Piazza, and he was in this instant like a boy who finds himself confronted with things which he does not understand, but nevertheless feels the pleasure they bring him. He was overwhelmed by the feeling of immense sincerity which came to him, a realisation of the capacity for the utmost truthfulness in his thoughts and his very speech. But withal, he avoided any word which might have afforded Nisard an opening to speak of the bill and of its consequences.



Nisard was a little surprised at this nonchalant indifference, and wrongly attributed it to a lack of scrupulousness, if not to a cynicism which seemed to him so frightful that he dared not even contemplate its existence, much less discuss it. Therefore, unconsciously, he seconded the bookseller's unspoken wish, and, seeing that he could talk with him as usual, he took him to admire a view of Siena from the walls of the Fortezza.

"Come and see how much more beautiful the colouring is at this time of day than in the evening," he said to Giulio. "I have convinced myself of the fact by comparing the two, and by coming here often in the mornings and during the day."

Immediately at this point a cluster of houses comes into view, with the cathedral. In Fontebranda, on the other hand, the buildings bifurcate in the centre, leaving an empty space between them. The houses around the cathedral appear crushed under its massed pile, and, in turn, hang heavily over the underlying orchards and country. After a while they descend lower and lower on the slope, and finally almost entirely disappear from sight under an outstanding rock, leaving only a confused heap of red-tiled roofs in view. The larger houses seem to support the smaller ones, so closely together are they packed, and so impossible is it to distinguish amongst them

any sign of a street or thoroughfare. The whole mass is strangely and capriciously divided by a minute network of clefts, cross-cuts and grotesque corners and sharp angles, of all sizes and lengths. Then, as the town spreads itself on the slopes, the roofs become rarer and finally stand out in solitary groups among the fields and meadows. The country around stretches to far horizons, silent and immense, and Siena, in all this sunny taciturnity, seems gathered to herself, meditative and unapproachable. The distant peaks, reaching to the Comate di Gerfalco, with their faint outline, give the needed touch of relief to the landscape.

Giulio gazed with avidity at it all; never as now had he so loved his Siena; never had he felt so proud of it. Nisard watched the effect of it and instinctively he turned and led him away, feeling that the impression on Giulio, and his emotional acceptance of it, might prove too strong.

"I could have stayed there for ever," Giulio breathed.

"You are of Siena, and yet I'll wager that you had never been here."

"That's so. I used to come here in my childhood, but of course I didn't appreciate it then."

"Will you come back sometimes now, alone?"

"Who knows? We're alive to-day and to-morrow, perhaps, dead. I remember, when I was young, that if I was alone for a little time

and had nothing to do I would gradually become the prey of a kind of suspicion or doubt which filled me with dread. I was not even sure of being alive. I couldn't explain to you the feeling that I had, but I'll try to make you understand. Have you ever felt sometimes, when dreaming, a vague sensation—one cannot even define whether it is pleasing or sad—which prevented you from believing your dream to be true? And yet you so wanted it to be real. But this peculiar feeling detached your dream—kept it a thing apart—and you realised the impossibility of identifying yourself with it. Well, the reality—they call it reality—which surrounded me, produced on me the same effect. I could never make out whether the life around me was real, or whether it was only a gigantic dream to which I had become accustomed, and of which I was only conscious at times. For example: imagine that every instant, even of the present, has for me a sense of conventional reality." 2,

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But Nisard did not like this kind of conversation and showed his disapproval by turning up his nose and moving away a pace or two from the bookseller, without a word of comprehension.

"In those few minutes in which I stood by you in the Fortezza," Giulio went on, "I realised *how* I had been living for so many years, one after the other. And I should not want to begin again. It seems to me that one's

memory is occasionally eclipsed, and then reappears more vividly than ever, or than one would wish."

Nisard made a wry face, and smilingly replied: "Yes, yes, I understand."

If he could have given voice to his innermost thoughts he would more probably have said: "I came with you because I wanted to know the whole story of the forged bills, and not to listen to all these out-of-the-way reflections. They seem to me to be merely the nonsensical wanderings of a distracted mind."

Therefore, feeling uncomfortably disappointed, he announced to Giulio that he must leave him and return to San Domenico, where he was at the moment studying some work of Matteo di Giovanni. He went, laughing inwardly, and rather looking forward to recounting the whole incident, in its most amusing form, to some of his acquaintances. It would sound well and would give him scope for humorous comment. He had been rather foolish to imagine that he ought to console such a madman. He entered the chapel and began his work, and immediately forgot everything else.

Giulio continued on his way, feeling almost intoxicated with the strength of his emotions. He felt a kind of bitter joy, and his inner self was conscious of the existence of a quantity of malevolent parasites struggling to come to the surface and to overthrow all else. The dif-

ferent phases of his consciousness had solidified, one after the other, and he tried in vain to explain them to himself coherently, or in harmony one with another. He was no longer free to think as he wished, and he realised now that his daily conscience had been inspired, not by his feelings—always mobile—but by certain invariabilities to which perhaps his feelings had unconsciously been affixed. So the wish to die was also now invariable. It did not seem necessary to him to see the members of his family again; he felt that he must remain alone as much as possible; it was his duty to do so and he would not shirk it. In that moment he could feel no affection for them; and when he came to the bookshop he opened its door with the certainty that at the same time he would realise and understand the truth of his sentiments.

With its shutters down the shop was dark, and he lit the gas. The roar of the gas as it escaped from the burner and caught the flame filled him with terror. He looked around him, and there surged within him a mad impulse to hurl himself at the walls of the shop. *They* had led him to lie and forge, and then to lose; *they* were the stronger——

Suddenly there was a knock: Niccolo was calling him. Should he answer? Not now. He was far beyond him now. He left Niccolo to beat out his knuckles on the door and turned



to the drawer of his desk. From it he drew out a strong piece of rope with which a large parcel of books had been bound. At this point the belief that he would commit suicide left him altogether. No, of course he would not kill himself. He climbed on to a tall stool and tested the strength of an iron hook in the beam across the ceiling with his hammer. He was quite certain that he would not take his own life. He tied the rope to the hook and made a running noose. Then he descended from his stool and contemplated the rope from all sides, feeling a strong inclination to smile. He looked at it jokingly, but he felt, nevertheless, that it would be better to take it down. He feared that he might obey its simple invitation to put his head through it. . . . Deliriously he spoke to it, asking not to be tempted. He dared not touch it again. "I'll leave it here for ever," he said, "so that all can see to what a state I was reduced." He was now behaving like one demented. He propped the door for fear that a crowd should surge against it and beat it down. They would not be long in coming. He could hear them arriving from all sides. There was no way of resisting the onslaught, the props were giving way. All the sham antiques on the wooden chest were saying to him: "You are on our level. You are one of us. It's useless for you to try and avoid us." "Wait," he answered



## *Three Crosses*

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aloud, "wait, and I'll forge a signature." And he saw his forged signature dancing before him on the stone floor. He stooped to pick it up; he plunged with his head under the shelves; the signature was there, but he could no longer see it. "See," he cried, "I haven't got it in my hands!"

He turned out the light. In the darkness, without realising that he was taking his own life, he put his head in the noose. Feeling it tighten, he would have liked to cry out, but he could not.

## XIV

THE local magistrate had the body taken away to the Anatomical Institute, but after two days permission was granted to bury it in the Laterino cemetery. Enrico and Niccolo accompanied the last journey, walking behind the green stretcher. They were suspicious of everybody they met, and their one desire was to hurry the proceedings as much as possible, almost as if they feared being arrested together with their dead. The sexton was the only person to help them compose the body in the coffin on their arrival at the cemetery. After a few moments the chaplain arrived, and, putting on his stole, he blessed another body, which was also lying in the chapel, awaiting burial, sprinkling it with holy water from the aspersorium. He was an old priest, squat and thick-set, with a withered, parched face, and hob-nailed boots—a true contadino.

The two brothers stood bare-headed, taking care not to set their feet on some decayed flowers, no doubt fallen days ago from some wreath, and now lying crushed on the pavement of the tiny chapel, staining it with their bruised remains.

The priest reddened and, indicating with his chin the coffin in which their brother lay, asked :

"How did he commit suicide?"

Niccolo was beside himself with rage, but Enrico replied:

"With a slip-knot."

The priest, at this, hurriedly saluted them and left, as though in a fury of haste, with his umbrella and hat in his hand. He came and went continually between his house and the cemetery, and he never had a moment to lose.

There was a heavy, grey sky, almost yellowish, and a universal dampness in the air which left its mark on everything, animate and inanimate. Even the cemetery gate and railings dripped monotonous drops from their many bars and crossbars. The gravestones were being washed by the all-pervading drizzle and the tops of the cypresses were hidden in the mist. Although it was now ten o'clock, the impression was one of a permanent gloomy dawn. Siena, with a grey veil drawn over it, looked uniform and uninteresting. After a while, however, the mist slowly dispersed, and the town and surrounding country took on a more familiar aspect. Little by little one could recognise the different groups of houses, and even the houses themselves; then, later, the different colours became distinguishable, though still all washed over with a softening tone of grey. Lastly, there remained a white, shining mist on the horizon.

"I'm dropping with fatigue," Niccolo complained.

"And my knees are aching too: that's my rheumatic gout," Enrico joined in. "Still, we must wait now."

The sexton called two assistants, and together they lowered the coffin into a grave. Then immediately they started shovelling the soil down on to it.

The two brothers wept. They felt that they were leaving down there something which they had loved and which now was irrevocably lost to them; they were genuinely moved. Giulio had taken on himself the whole responsibility of things, and so had saved them. He had held them together, and even to his last action had assumed the sole blame for their concerted schemes. Yes; they wept for him, and their tears were spontaneous and genuine.

"Will you go home by the short cut?" Niccolo asked his brother when they emerged from the cemetery.

"What else do you want me to do?"

"Well, I'm going round by San Marco instead."

"Why? Let's go home together."

Niccolo, however, with hurried steps went his own way, leaving his brother behind. He entered a tobacconist's, where he knew that his recent journey to the cemetery would not even be suspected, and bought himself a cigar, after which he again hurried off to find Corsali. In less than two hours these two had come to an

agreement as to Niccolo's immediate future; he also would become an insurance agent: he was well fitted for it—knowing intimately all the surrounding towns and country—and he was willing to take up all the travelling which the work entailed.

Modesta had a few hundred lire of her own, which she would no doubt make use of in this emergency.

"I have settled my affairs," said Niccolo to his brother, at the table that same evening; "and I'll provide for my wife and the girls. So you can make your own plans."

"Give me time, at least!"

"Oh no! You won't even come here to sleep to-night, because I don't want you any longer: there's no room for you. My wife and I are going to take a smaller house; and you can have your things taken away."

Possibly this was a whim of Niccolo's and the result of the last two days' meditation. It would have been useless to attempt to explain to him the inconvenience of its suddenness.

Modesta, not spitefully, but quite naturally, agreed with her husband, and Enrico tried in vain to obtain any favour from her. Niccolo was present all the time, and insisted on his original request that he should move at once.

"It ought not even to have been necessary for me to tell you," he added.

Enrico, utterly at a loss, turned to him.

"Lend me at least enough money to engage a room," he begged.

Niccolo would give him nothing, but Modesta surreptitiously handed him a hundred lire.

Enrico took them and went, staggering like a drunken man.

When the trial came on they both—as if by mutual accord—threw all blame upon Giulio and lamented him, and they were acquitted.

Still, nothing remained of their belongings, and the Cavaliere Nicchioli barely succeeded in recovering, by the sale of their effects, half the amount of the first bill which he had accepted for them.

✦ Enrico refused to turn his hand to any work, and the hundred-lire note, which he had kept in his pocket instead of using it for paying the rent of his room, sufficed him for little more than a week. It was impossible for him suddenly to change his habits and ways, and he even continued to call regularly at his favourite tavern. There he complained continually of his fate, and attributed to Niccolo all his poverty. He was still tortured by his gout, and altogether was reduced to a very bad state. In the end he developed the habit of stopping the late bookshop's wealthier customers and asking them for a few lire. These, after the first few times, would pretend not to see him, and avoid or ignore him, or in various ways let him understand that they could not and would not listen



to him. But, urged by his acute necessity for money, he would even follow them for quite a distance, and then, overtaking them, at what he thought a propitious moment, would oblige them at least to give ear to his tale.

"Niccolo was not ashamed to send me away and to take all that belonged to me," he would invariably say. "I could eat him alive with my hate! I ought to fight him with his own weapons. I can't work, because my gout won't allow me to. Look—if you don't believe it—look at the lumps on my finger joints! It's pitiful to see! And now, to add to it, I've also got nervous and intestinal uræmia. I *must* be helped."

Niccolo, on the other hand, since the day of the trial, had got on rather well, and was beginning to feel fairly free and comfortable. Those who had known him in the past as a collector of antiques were still his friends, and as they were dispersed all over the country-side it was the most natural thing in the world that they should invite him to meals when he travelled about, and he thus made up for the economic fare of his own household. He had regained his good humour, even though he had rapidly grown older.

"I am lucky," he used to say, striking his ample chest with his fist, and squaring his shoulders almost defiantly. And, erect and tall, he would carry himself with a free and

easy air, sometimes even affecting a brisk walk and merry twinkle of the eye.

His household, however, was much depressed and dispirited by the sudden need for stringent economy into which they were plunged, and seemed as if they would never forget the by-gone days of comfort, or ever tire of comparing them with the present.

Chiarina had not lost her fiancé, but had become even more shy and retiring than ever, and she very rarely indulged now with Lola in the laughter which had so united formerly. Modesta, in fulfilment of a vow, would bring offerings of candles to the Madonna del Duomo, and there, under the glimmering little silver hanging lamps, kneeling with her nieces on either side of her, she would pray for endless hours, her eyes fixed on the altar, surrounded by all its different ex-voto hearts and jewels of all sizes and shapes in glittering profusion.

Behind her polished, bright glass case the Madonna was barely discernible, but the anxiety and anguish of the suppliant daily increased in fervour. Without her faith the poor woman would not have known how to live; she would not have felt herself to be a human living creature at all.

Niccolo would have preferred her not to go to church so often, but dared not reprove her for it. He continued to follow his own inclinations for comfort and convenience in all things

regarding himself, and the rest of the world was confronted by his irascible jocularity, the scoffing humour, which shone through his every glance. He knew no greater satisfaction than that afforded him by an invitation to dinner; except perhaps the even greater one of returning to Siena and recounting it all in detail to Modesta, who in turn would find even less pleasure than usual in her own simple fare. Nevertheless she thanked God that her husband could be so easily satisfied, and his own good humour would eventually affect herself and the household in general. Towards the end of the year, however, and barely two months after Giulio's death, Niccolo began to suffer from acute pains in the head which left him dazed and weak. He could do nothing to rid himself of them, and his good humour would leave him with each attack. Following this, he became a prey to sleeplessness, and after a particularly bad night he would feel incapable of taking his train and attending to his duties. He would lie in bed until, smitten with remorse, he would get up and hobble along to the Insurance Company's offices to make up for lost time. The insomnia gave him a feeling of living too much, almost double the normal life. And when he lay in bed in the mornings he would be assailed by a thousand sorrows and he would feel miserable and dejected.

"How do you feel, Modesta, when I no

longer laugh?" he would ask. "Don't you think, then, that the whole house seems dead? When I laugh I shake it all, and you all feel better. Pity I didn't bring home that wooden chest that I had in the bookshop. I've got nothing to look at in bed from here. I could have placed it against one of the walls, and it would have improved the room immensely."

Then he would turn restlessly towards the window.

"My eyes are getting misty," he would say; "I don't know why."

However, if Modesta stayed near him, or fussed round him, were it only perhaps to bring him an extra pillow, he would become impatient and would ask her to go. Then, if Modesta would tearfully resent it, he would mock her by repeating her words in her own tone of voice, and he always wanted his nieces, from the other side of the open door, to hear his fun and laugh at it.

"You must obey me!" he would thunder, rather inconsequently. "Do you wish to make me die of tears? That is a sure proof that you can have no affection for me."

When they would laugh at his jokes he would raise his head and ask:

"Who gave you leave to laugh?"

Then, angrily exasperated, he would remain hour after hour without uttering a single word. He hoped to get better soon, and he made up

his mind that in the spring he would go to some hot springs. But he became steadily worse.

✓ Besides the insomnia, at the mere thought of which he was filled with terror, he began to have fits of delirium. At first not much attention was paid to them, as he thought he was merely having specially bad nightmares, but as they continued the whole household would awake and tremblingly listen to him, terror-stricken and frozen into inaction. He uttered wanton and insane things. He was for ever under the impression that he was being locked in the bookshop and that no one would let him out. Then they made him swing Giulio's body to and fro on its hook and rope. Also it seemed to him that he was obliged to walk naked on all fours. In the end he would burst out into a loud, endless laugh; a slobbering, spluttering laugh that would moisten all his beard. ✕ These delirious fits intensified in a very few weeks, and after each attack he was left weak and with pain in his head, which was even worse. During the day he would insist on going out as usual, and would firmly refuse to have anyone with him. He would walk through solitary streets, and the boys on meeting him on their way home from school would surround him and make fun of him, noisily and heartlessly. He was never even irritated by this; on the contrary, he boasted

of it, and would speak of it to his wife as if he had taken part in festivities and rejoicings. She would fear then that he might be losing his mind, and begged him to have medical advice. It was enough for her to hint even distantly at such a thing to make him return to his normal state of mind at once; he would regain his normal appearance directly. One could see, however, that it was an effort for him to do so, more especially as, if the strain were prolonged, his skin would become pale and flaccid, and his face take on a paralysed, stolid expression, seeming almost totally devoid of any intelligence whatever.

One night he was assailed by such a violent delirium that he rolled out of bed on to the ground, and there, sitting amongst the overturned chairs, he began to scream as he had never been heard to do before. His voice rose ever more piercing and shrill, with an impetus and intensity that made one shudder. Then suddenly it dropped to low, flat tones; again, varied by a sharp, humorous note, it would scale up and down; a voice devoid of sense and of speech, but nevertheless still occasionally lighting on sweet inflexions and tuneful, tender, almost pleading, expression.


It was impossible this time to quieten him. He had a few, a very few, lucid intervals in which he remembered the time when he was strong and well and he wanted immensely



to be cured ; but these interludes of calm disappeared almost immediately, and he remained with his mouth wide open and his face all awry, gaping and vacant. Then, again, he became uncontrollable and threw himself on the ground, raving. This last attack, which agonised Modesta and shattered the nerves of the two girls, lasted nearly three hours without abatement. Finally his voice weakened more and more and in the end died away altogether. It was succeeded by the death-rattle, ghastly and terrifying, like a repressed laugh, gurgling in the congealed blood of a rheumatic apoplexy.

## XV

AS with the rejection of the bill, which Enrico had first learnt of in the tavern, so it was there too that he heard of the death of Niccolo. He had died before dawn. Enrico was now in a very bad state of health indeed ; his hands and legs were swollen, and his mouth was livid. He never said anything that was not full of a repellent and coarse wickedness. He was sitting, at the time, with a glass of wine on the table in front of him.



"I begin to believe that God really exists," he said on hearing the news, and he scratched the lousy hair at the nape of his neck. "He died before me, the dog ! He did all he could to get me out of the way, but he went first after all. Oh !—there ! Did you hear what I've just been told ? That scoundrel of a brother of mine has died. Now I'd like to see his wife laid out. That lump of flesh and fat ! And I certainly won't follow the example of that imbecile, Giulio, who, hanging from the ceiling, wished to bless us with his kicking feet."

His friends inside the dark and smelly hole of a place laughed, and, imitating his rather drawling tones, replied :

"When *you* die, we'll all get drunk in real earnest. The landlord certainly won't mix any

## Three Crosses

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water with our drink that day! How much longer do you think *you'll* last out?"

"What do I care? If I were as well off as I was once upon a time, it would be different, but now——"

"You never were wealthy, you know."

"All the same, you used to have quite a lot of respect for me then, didn't you?"

At this one of the men came up from behind and, taking him by surprise, poured the contents of a water-jug inside his collar and down his back. He jumped from his stool, shaking himself.

"Oh!" he gasped, "don't you realise that you might make me die in real earnest! With gout like mine! And I've never recovered, besides, from that nervous internal complaint."

"What do *we* care? You always have the same old story."

"My story is a true one, anyhow, and no invention."

Seeing, however, that it was useless to protest or get angry over it, from which he would most certainly have gained nothing, he sat down again. Turning his back on the men, he began to gossip with the host, who leaned with his hand on the door, and his forehead against his hand, and listened to him.

"This morning," Enrico went on, "the Count was not ashamed to hand me a beggarly half-lira. I followed him the length and breadth of

Siena, and I told him that I had not even enough to eat. If I were wealthy, I'd teach all these gentlemen a thing or two! I think I ought to start dealing in the love affairs of all these fine gentlemen's wives, and then I'd soon be rich enough!"

"It would certainly be a trade that would suit you," replied the host.

"You see," Enrico rambled on, "I can't and won't start pushing a barrow with other people's luggage in it from the station. A porter! No! I've never done it up to the present and I won't do it now. Should I become a blacksmith? Where could I get the necessary strength? It's no use: when one is born with the soul of a gentleman nothing will ever alter it. Impossible!"

"Where do you sleep?"

"On a wooden bench of the Lizza, under the fir-trees. But it's beginning to be very uncomfortable because of the cold. With my rheumatism and gout, I assure you that my bones absolutely creak, and I get such attacks of neuralgia that I am almost out of my mind. All my bones ache, and I get so restless that I can't sleep at all. I can't keep still with it, and can't settle down in any comfortable position. Even if I *did* have a blanket to cover me, I shouldn't be able to keep it on; I couldn't stand even the weight of that. Why, if you were only to touch me ever so lightly

with a finger it would make me jump with pain. So I get down from my bench after a while and start walking about. I'd have to do that anyway, to keep myself warm and to stop my teeth from chattering. I walk round until it's nearly light, and then, when I *could* go to sleep, the gardeners come along and I am sent away. And so I never rest."

"Can't you find a hole anywhere, a cave, something or other, where you can at least get shelter? What about the rain too?"

"I slept for over a week in those caves down by the Pescaia road. But it is such a place for lovers in the night. And then, too, the hole reeks with the smell of refuse, and in the morning, on an empty stomach, I felt so weak as to be almost fainting. The Lizza is a much better and cleaner place. Anyhow, I'd just like to know why you enjoy listening to all these delightful descriptions of mine."

"You're always such a boaster, that's the worst of you. And there's no way of shaking it out of you. You'd better go now. See if you can't collect a few more coppers. Go, or else the swells will soon have finished their afternoon walk."

Enrico got up, and turning once more to the men inside he asked :

"Do you want anything from me?"

No one replied, and he walked up to them and repeated his question.

One of them turned to him :

"Here you are, take this twist. If you could get enough of it you could do without food, couldn't you?"

Enrico put the tobacco into his mouth to chew it. His clothes would hardly keep together, so ragged were they, and all his buttons were missing. He presented a very sorry spectacle indeed, especially to those who had known him in bygone days.

Not knowing how to drag the time away for the rest of the afternoon, he sauntered towards the cemetery. The gate-keeper would not at first let him in, thinking that he might want to steal something. At this Enrico became angry, and, as was usual with him when enraged, his lips curled back like those of a snarling wolf, and exposed his still beautiful white teeth, clenched and gleaming.

"Don't you recognise me?" he asked. "A few months ago I came here to bury that brother of mine who committed suicide. To-day I come to bury another brother who on the last occasion was also here."

"What is his name?"

"Niccolo Gambi."

"He's already buried. They brought him down this morning."

"Where have they buried him?"

"In the older part of the cemetery, which, by the way, will soon be done away with al-



together by order of the borough. There, almost at the bottom. You'll recognise the grave ; it's the newest one there."

"I see. I'll go."

The gate-keeper's fears, however, were not quite allayed.

"Wait for me a moment," he said ; "I'll take you there myself. I've got to go down that way in any case to prepare another grave."

It was beginning to rain, and the drizzle was so icy that it set them shivering. All the older part of the cemetery was being overhauled. The gravestones had been taken out and were leaning, in a row, against a wall. All the crosses, also, were stacked in a pile, and lay beside a tree. The cypresses were scenting the air, as though the rain was drawing out their very sap. The birds hopped about on the surrounding wall, restless and round-eyed.

The gate-keeper whistled to the sexton to let him know that he was there, and then turned to Enrico.

"That is the grave," and he pointed to it.

"Are you sure it is?"

"I remember them all quite well, and I'm sure I'm not making any mistakes. What are you going to do now?"

"I just wanted to know which one it was so that I could return to it some time at leisure."

He wandered round it, quite close to it,

almost setting his foot on it; then he turned away.

The gate-keeper kept him in sight until he had gone out of the cemetery.

Enrico suddenly recollected how his brother had abruptly left him at this very spot, and he felt his fists clench: it seemed hardly possible to him that Niccolo was already dead.

He could not make up his mind to enter the city. This *porta* was much narrower than the others, and was used only as a means of reaching the cemetery. He had paused in his walk, but then, noticing that the customs official, from his little wooden hut, was eyeing his movements rather suspiciously, he entered.

On the other side of the gateway he saw, on his left, the Hospice for the Aged Infirm, and he stopped unconsciously to look at it. An old man, dressed in black, sat on the wall, with his back to the road, and standing beside him was a nun. Suddenly he thought that no doubt with a word of recommendation from some influential person he also could be taken in and sheltered there with these others.

He dragged his feet wearily; all that day he had tasted no food. That old man sat there, under a pergola, calmly, sheltered from the wind and the rain. He, on the contrary, had no place to go to, and he felt ill and at the end of his strength.

Modesta, who was now getting along fairly

well with the help of needlework and lace-making, felt, in a way, that she was bound to do all she could to help Enrico, and it seemed to her that she would be shirking her duty if she let him end his days in such misery, without at least some words of help or comfort. In this frame of mind, and with the best intentions, she would lie in wait for him, where she knew he would be sure to pass. Then, as he would come by and look straight ahead as though he had not seen her, she would hesitate for an instant, then, drawing herself very erect, she would follow and overtake him. She would slip into his hand—which he was careful not to open at once—a few lire—all she could spare—and would continue to walk by his side, even though he would not even turn his head to look at her.

“Why?” she would say to him, “why don’t you believe in God? Poor Niccolo, too, died without being able to make his confession; and Giulio committed suicide. Perhaps now they are both very unhappy. We *must* pray for their souls.”

Enrico would take on an expression of hatred and would seem to withdraw into himself as much as possible so that she should not get in touch with him.

“Go and ask the Canons of the Duomo for help,” she would continue. “Stop them when they come out of the choir after the morning



service, and tell them how you have hardly had a bite all day. Surely they would help."

She reasoned to herself that if he would go to the priests to ask for help he might in time be brought back to the faith. But Enrico would have nothing to do with priests or with the Church, and in a strained voice would reply :

"That's enough! Go!"

Modesta, untiring, never forgot to ask before leaving him :

"Do you need any washing done? Shall I wash some of your handkerchiefs at least? Come home to us and let us mend your clothes ; they really are terribly ragged."

He would deign no answer, but would walk away ; and she would return home with the same weight in her heart, although her conscience felt slightly eased.

Enrico would not listen to her, because he feared that the girls, Chiarina and Lola, seeing him, would have been ashamed of him. He would have felt too pained at that.

Whenever by chance he saw them in the distance he would disappear at once, perhaps plunging into the first doorway at hand, there to wait and hide until they had gone by.

Sometimes in the tavern he would say to his friends :

"For me, they are two angels. I would not shock their innocence by letting them see me in this state."

By this time he had acquired a thorough knowledge of all the most solitary and mean parts of Siena, and there only would he feel himself safe from intrusion. He would approach them with a sense of security and complete isolation. He felt these when he rested in the Via del Sole, under the houses of Salicotto, where his greatest preoccupation was that of trying to avoid the drips from the rags hung out from the windows to dry. There was the probability that an old discarded boot thrown out as useless would suddenly strike his head ; or perhaps the tomato skins and the leavings of dirty dishes and saucepans would be flung out of the conveniently open windows in the fervour of the daily washing-up, to lie on the pavement below and add to the danger of the passers-by. Different tattered articles of clothing would also find their way out into the gutters, and his eyes would be fixed on them for hours at a stretch.



Finally, after another dreary month, towards the beginning of February he was taken into the Hospice for the Poor. He would have liked to refuse to go there, as he felt it was humiliating, but in the end he had to give way. After all, was it not better to be here than sitting, as he had often done, almost dying of hunger, and watching a stray dog, with lean, quivering ribs, sniffing and worming its way into some putrid rubbish-heap, to emerge triumphant

with a bone, to feel intensely envious of it, and, with his mouth watering, to watch it with hungry, glittering eyes? Infinitely better here, even though damaging to one's pride.

He was put into a large room, containing about a hundred beds, not one of which was empty. After they had bathed him and clothed him with a suit of coarse reddish material and a blue-bordered cap like that of all the other inmates, he felt degraded.

In the first few days he could not resist glaring at whatever food his companions were taking, and it seemed to him always that his own portions were not sufficient for him.

As he was amongst the younger inmates, he was sent out to work in the orchard, to pick up the prunings left under the olive-trees. Then, with two comrades, he would have to bring them to an open space where the lemon hot-houses were.

He thought often of his nieces, and would have loved them to visit him on Sundays. They did not know of his wish to see them, however, though they spent many an evening outside the Hospice, gazing wistfully in, and wondering.

One morning while at his usual work in the orchard he turned to those nearest to him.

"If I should die soon," he announced, "I'd like you to tell my nieces, who will surely come to see me, that I had started to work."



The men spoken to lifted their gaze from the ground and looked at him, without replying. He explained :

"I've got a scrap of conscience too. And only those two girls understand it and believe in it."

The oldest among the workers stood listening to him, and in order to listen they stopped in their work. Others tried to smile to him, and could not ; they merely moved their lips as if they were chewing.

"It's months and months since they spoke to me last," he continued.

And somewhere inside him moved an unspoken but insistent thought :

"They might bring me a sip of wine if they came."

He had, however, in the last few months suffered too much, and his strength was past recovery. One night, not long after, he was seized by a paroxysm of gout, which, by now, poisoned his whole system, and he passed away, so gently as to be absolutely unconscious of his approaching death. In the morning he was found dead, cold as the marble of the refectory table.

Lola and Chiarina placed two bunches of flowers on his bed, one on his left and one on his right. There was only one candle, which, being of tallow, leaned over more and more on one side, overcome by the heat of its own

## *Three Crosses*

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red flame, as though in its wick was imprisoned a single drop of lifeless blood.

They knelt and prayed, their hands joined together, each near her posy of flowers, and, between them, the dead man became every moment better and kindlier.

The next day they broke their money-box and asked Modesta to buy with its contents three crosses, exactly alike, to be placed in the cemetery at the Laterino.

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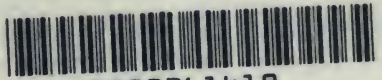
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